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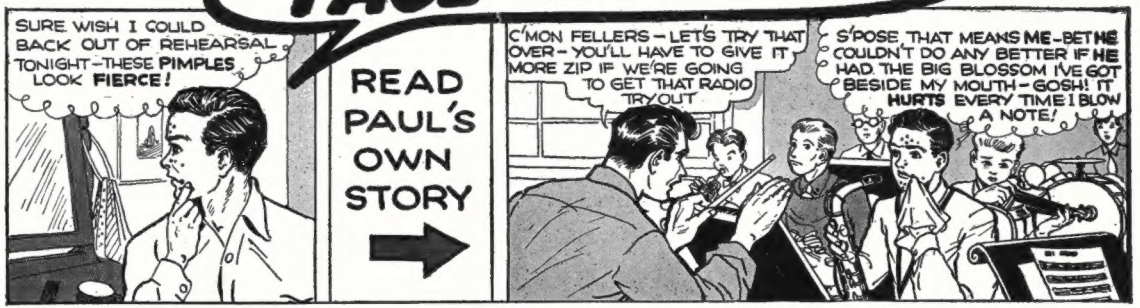

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TEN DETECTIVE ACES

A. A. WYN, Editor — HARRY WIDMER, Managing Editor

Vol. XXIX — MARCH, 1937 — No. 1

Ten Complete, Different Stories—No Serials!

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Mike McLernon's old chief forced him to turn in his detective badge for prying into the "closed" Barnwell case. But McLernon plunged blindly, without authority of the law, into a flesh-and-blood trap of his own making.

2. EMPEROR BLACKMAIL . . . . . Steve Fisher 36
A lovely young girl's trust rested in Detective Captain Mark Turner's hands. Yet he thought he was hard-boiled enough to blast her faith in life—just to convict his man.

3. LAST CHANCE ACRE . . . . . Maitland Scott 43
"Mother" Calahan, traffic cop, wanted to prove to the scoffers at headquarters that a family man's knowledge can sometimes trap killers.

4. A FRAME FOR DYNAMITE (Novelet) . . . H. H. Stinson 49
It was a suicidal job for Detective Pat Kilroy to get that blonde's body under cover when a savage frameup combo was eagle-eying his every move.

5. DAME DEATH . . . . . S. J. Bailey 66
That mystery hitch-hiker was willing to thumb his way into the treachery car of the pick-up murder girl who cold-bloodedly tossed her victims along the highways.

6 G-MAN FRIDAY ("Dizzy Duo" Yarn) . . . . Joe Archibald 77
Snooty and Scoop follow the clue of egg-stain, instead of blood-stain, in the case of the impolite murder of Mr. Quagmyre.

7. MURDER BETWEEN THE LINES (Novelet) . Carl McK. Saunders 86
When Captain John Murdock found that Gloria West was in danger, he discovered that he could do only one thing to help her—take the part of the corpse-to-be on a one-way ride.

8. HELL'S HOSTAGE . . . . . Archer Williams 101
Knowing that his possession of the grim Kubla ruby promised torture and death, Dave Belden kept the gem. For it was the touchstone to happiness for Anne Shepard.

9. APRIL FOOL'S FINISH . . . . . Cliff Howe 112
A True Crime Story

THE NEXT ISSUE OF TEN DETECTIVE ACES 114

10. POSED BY THE REAPER . . . . . Ralph Powers 115
Inspector Ben Hauser's chance of breaking a killer's alibi hung by a hair that might mean his own scalp.

Cover by Wm. E. Luberoff

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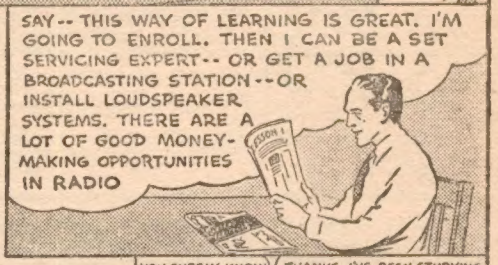

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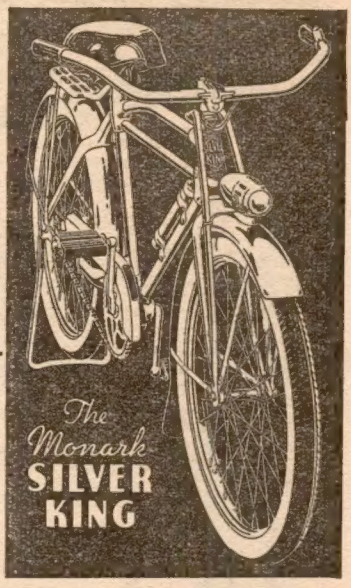

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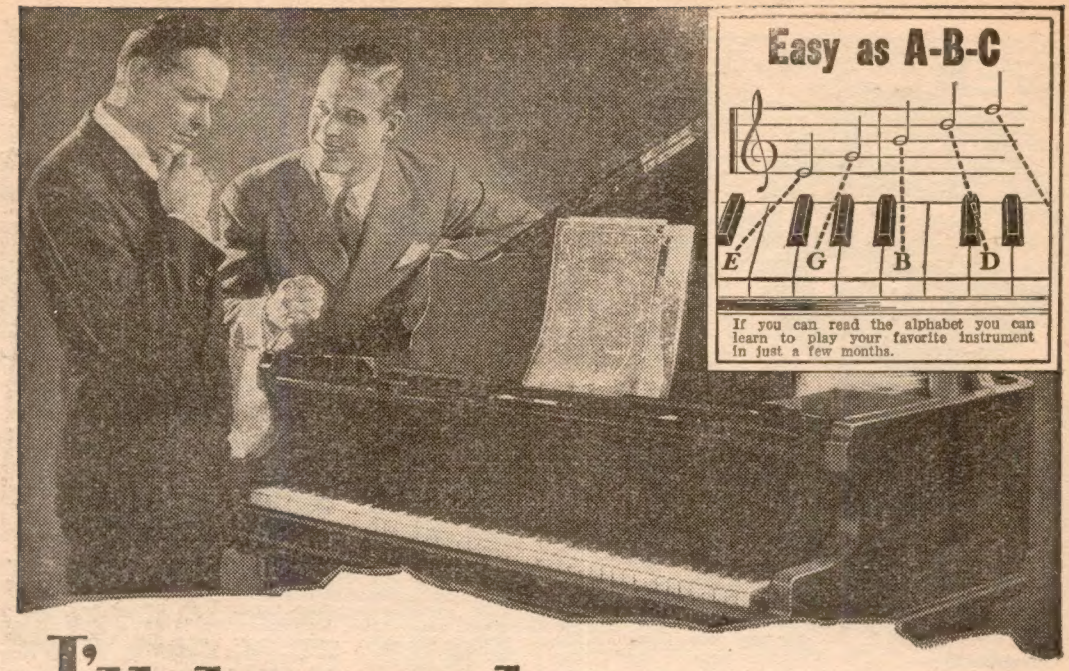

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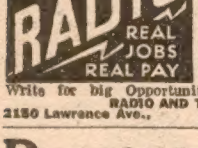

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.60	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
29x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
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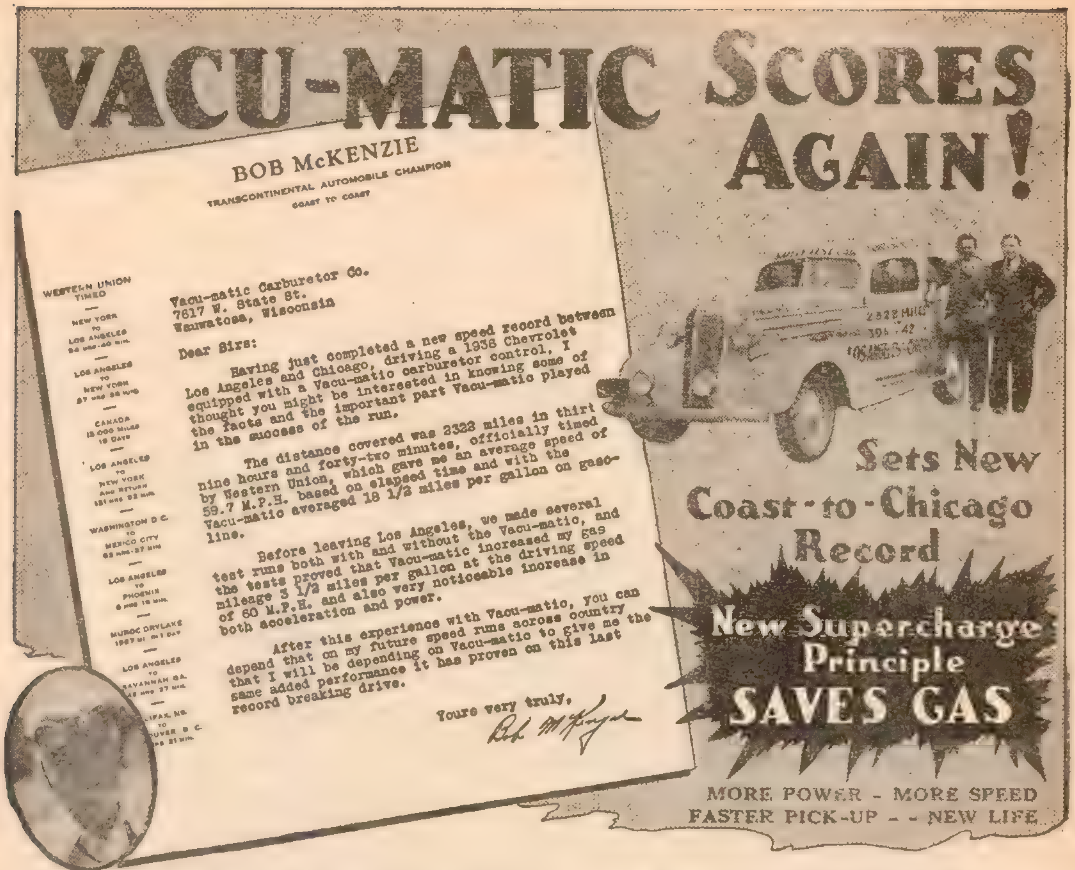

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The Blood

"Dodge!" Mike yelled at Helen as he dived for Rafferty.

CHAPTER I

Doom Door

MIKE McLERNON pounded his heels across the wide stone floor in the central lobby of City Hall. A man coming out of one of the elevators recognized him and said, "Hello, Mike," but McLernon didn't see or hear him.

Beyond the bank of elevators, a corridor branched off. McLernon turned briskly into this, and the clicking beat of his heels sounded much louder now in the confinement of marble walls on each side of him. He strode with the heel-hammering pace that comes from impatience, determination, rage.

Evenly spaced doors along the corridor had gold lettering on the panels to announce what business existed behind them: DETECTIVE BUREAU, PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT, BUREAU OF CRIMINOLOGY, AUTOMOBILE THEFT DETAIL, FINGERPRINTS . . .

Barrier

Great Detective Novel

By John K. Butler

Author of "The Mirror Maze Mystery," "Celluloid Doom," etc.

Mike McLernon was forced to turn in his detective lieutenant's badge, for he had been prying into the "closed" Barnwell case. The old chief had explained that McLernon was being fired to keep him from getting hurt. But McLernon didn't know the possible depth of that hurt—and he plunged blindly into a flesh-and-blood trap of his own making.

McLernon didn't glance at any of the doors as he paced directly ahead. He flicked a cigarette stub aimlessly and hard toward a brass cuspidor. It missed, struck the marble wall, and exploded in a brief shower of tiny sparks. McLernon paid no attention to what happened to the cigarette.

At the end of the corridor, there were wide double doors with frosted-glass panels. Gold lettering on the glass read:

CHIEF OF POLICE
William J. Conant

McLernon entered, straight-arming one of the doors so vigorously it shot all the way around on its hinges and banged hard against the inner wall.

"I want to see Conant!" he snapped.

The reception room had a few easy-chairs and davenports with nobody waiting on them. Behind a long mahogany

counter, a pair of typewriters *clickety-clicked,* and a tall, pasty-faced man in blue uniform, Conant's secretary, grinned in a way that was meant to be polite but was mostly self-conscious.

"I'm sorry, lieutenant; the chief's busy. He left word that if you'd make an appointment for tomorrow . . . . "

"The hell with tomorrow!" McLernon barked. "I'm seeing him *right now!*"

"I'm sorry . . . . "

McLernon completely disregarded him, strode the length of the counter and banged his fist three times against a door marked: CHIEF OF POLICE—PRIVATE.

He didn't wait for a response. Palming the knob, he threw that door inward just as hard as he'd straight-armed the door to the reception room. He stepped inside and slammed the door behind him.

Chief Conant looked up. He was alone in the big office that had windows looking out on the freight yards down the hill. He sat behind a huge desk fingering a sheaf of telegrams.

"Hello, Mike," he said, and blinked nervously.

He was fat, broad-faced, had very white and thinning hair and bushy-white eyebrows. His uniform bulged and wrinkled over his paunch; some of the brass buttons were hidden in the wrinkles. He appeared seventy years old, anyway, but he was actually fifty-two.

McLernon, strode over to the desk, leaned across it with both his big strong hands spread on the green blotter. "Hello," he bit out, "you double-crossing grafter!"

CHIEF CONANT winced under the name. The telegrams trembled in his fingers. It wasn't anger; it was something else. He batted his eyes owlishly, didn't look up at McLernon.

"Listen," he began, faltering. "You've got it all wrong, Mike. You're taking the wrong attitude. That's why I wanted you to turn in your badge upstairs, instead of here."

Mike McLernon gave a bitter laugh. "Yeah? Well, I'm turning it in right here. I'm dropping it straight on your desk."

He shot his right hand into his pants pocket, picked out a bronze shield. Across the top of the shield, lettered on a scroll that was part of the design, were the words: *Lieutenant of Detectives.*

"There it is," McLernon challenged, and flipped the badge over the blotter.

"Now, listen—" Conant muttered nervously.

The door opened a little, and the secretary stuck his head into the office, saying: "I'm sorry, chief, but he forced his way past me."

"That's all right," Conant said.

McLernon turned around and snapped: "Get out!"

The door closed again.

"Listen—" Conant tried once more.

"Why should I? I know all the answers. *I'm* doing the talking; *you're* doing the listening. I called you some names a second ago. You don't like it. You think I shouldn't call you names for two reasons: one, you've got official authority; two, you're over fifty, and I'm thirty, and it's not supposed to be good etiquette to tell off your superiors and your elders. Well, my stand, I don't work for the Department any more, so you're not my superior; I still have respect for age when age deserves respect—but what makes you think you deserve it? You're the worst kind of crook on the books, Conant—there's no crook worse than a crooked cop!"

"You've got me all wrong," the chief muttered defensively. "You don't understand."

"Understand?" McLernon chuckled bitingly. "I understand this much: I got the can tied to my tail, I had to turn in my badge, and I'm all washed up with headquarters."

Conant nodded slowly. "Yes, but it's not me; it's the action of the Board of Police Commissioners."

"Oh, yeah? Don't make me laugh! *You're* the guy that canned me, Conant—you and nobody else. Don't try to pass the buck to the Board. *You* fired me. Why?"

Chief Conant fingered the telegrams in fatly nervous hands. He still didn't look

up at McLernon. "Well, you see, the Board—"

"Nuts! Was I a good cop, or wasn't I? Did I ever duck duty? Did anybody ever catch me accepting a bribe?

"No."

"How about in the courtroom? When I took the witness stand as an officer, did I have evidence against my prisoners, or didn't I?"

Conant shrugged. "Naturally . . . ."

"What did Judge Fricke say about me?"

"He said you were the best officer he ever heard from the bench—I'm not holding anything against you, Mike; it's the Board."

McLernon cut him off, yanked the telegrams from his trembling hands, tossed them scattering to the floor. He snapped:

"Don't keep passing the buck. I've been to see the Board. They told me my dismissal came from your recommendation —yours alone."

Chief of Police William J. Conant didn't answer, avoided McLernon's eyes. He swung his fat body in the swivel chair and carefully picked up, and placed in order, the telegrams McLernon had scattered at his feet. He thoughtfully stacked the wires on the blotter and put a paperweight on them.

McLernon barked impatiently: "Do you admit to recommending my dismissal, or don't you?"

Before that directly challenging question, Conant bowed his gray head. He stared at the blotter.

"Yeah, Mike," he nodded gravely, "I admit it."

McLERNON'S hands became fists on the blotter. It wasn't rage now. He'd secretly hoped that Conant wouldn't admit it. He wanted to believe Conant had nothing to do with it, even though facts from the Board of Police Commissioners were undeniable. He hoped without reason that Conant would offer him a logical explanation. But Conant had none. Conant admitted it.

"Why?" McLernon demanded.

"Well, you see, Mike, I can't just explain. I can't explain in words."

McLernon's short laugh was bitingly bitter. "I know the words; I know the music, too! It's the same old story—graft. They've reached you. They got to you with a bag of dollars."

"No," said Conant firmly, "no."

"Don't kid me!" McLernon scoffed. "I know where this begins. Two years ago a swell cop, just a uniformed patrolman, got rubbed out when he was trying to break up a job at the Great Southwest Jewelry Company. Two safecrackers got away and left the patrolman to bleed to death on the sidewalk after midnight. The patrolman was Dan Barnwell. He had a wife and three kids."

Conant wagged his gray head sympathetically. "I know. I'm sorry for Barnwell and his family. But every officer on the force faces death when he accepts a badge. All the boys know that."

"Don't kid me with the sob-sister act," McLernon said. "You conducted a half-hearted investigation into the Barnwell killing and the robbery of the jewelry company. Then you dropped it. You made all the boys work so hard on other cases that they couldn't handle the Barnwell thing."

"You've got me wrong . . . ."

"I've got you right! You hushed that case up and dropped it into the 'unsolved' records. Six months ago, I dug the papers out of the files and started to work on it. You told me to lay off. You assigned me to other cases, kept giving me a lot of reasons why I ought to be spending full time on these other jobs. So I took your other cases and worked on the Barnwell Case nights. You still told me to lay off. I didn't. So now you've had me canned."

Chief Conant shook his head thoughtfully. "You've still got it wrong, Mike. I'll tell you the real truth: this jewelry store job, and Barnwell's killing, runs deep."

"Sure, it runs deep. It runs right down to Gus Stoddard. He's a big-shot grafter. He bought you off. He told you to stick the Barnwell Case in the 'unsolved' file, and you did what he said."

"No."

"Don't slip me the 'no-stuff'! The reason you kept the boys off the case, and

canned me for trying to stick to it, is because Stoddard told you to lay off!"

"No," said Conant wearily.

"What, then?"

"Well, it runs deep; it's dangerous. Listen, Mike, when your old man was living, he and I had rookie beats the other side of the freight yards. He was a fine man, and after he passed on, I tried to see you and your brother get a start in life. You both did. Your brother's in a good business, and you've been a good cop. Now this Barnwell Case runs deep, and I want you to leave it alone. It's *you* I'm thinking about. I don't want anything to happen to you. That's all I can tell you, Mike."

McLernon laughed sarcastically. "Think I'm scared of Stoddard?"

"No."

"Then who?"

"I just don't want you to get hurt."

"So you fire me?" McLernon laughed.

"Well—"

"Well, get this," McLernon cut in, "I know how deep it runs. It runs right under your job. It runs back to Stoddard. You're scared of Stoddard, and you're scared of me because I might expose your graft. Okay, maybe I turned in my badge, but my gun's my own. I'm going to bust this case and find out who robbed the jewelry store—and who killed Barnwell. If my efforts knock your swivel chair out from under you, I don't care."

Chief Conant rose up behind the desk. His hand shook as he pointed at McLernon. "When you walk through that doorway, young man, you're just a citizen. You have no authority to work on official cases. Even if you want to carry a gun, you'd better get a county permit for it. Your badge is now on my desk; you're not an officer—you're nothing. And as man to man, for your own good, I'm warning you to leave the Barnwell Case alone."

McLernon laughed. "*My* good? You mean, *your* good. Badge or no badge, I'll be seeing you in court, chief. Too bad you let Stoddard reach you."

Conant banged his pudgy fist on the blotter. A lock of gray hair fell over his forehead. His eyes were harrowed and bloodshot under bushy brows. The finger he pointed toward the door trembled.

"Mike," he warned shakily, "if you walk through that doorway with that attitude, you're walking straight to your own doom. I've tried to make you steer away from danger, and you won't. I even fired you, and you still won't. I've done everything I can to protect you in the way your father, if he was living, would want me to. I can't do any more.

"All right, boy, you're on your own. But I'm telling you one thing—I was a peace officer the day you were born, and I've been a peace officer ever since. I've seen some tough cases in my time, but never did I hear of a fight like the fight you'll have if you walk through that door. *Go through the door. Go ahead!*"

McLernon's smile was stiffly polite as he reached for the doorknob. "*This door*, chief?"

Conant had perspiration on his brow, swiped at it in a single nervous gesture of his trembling hand. "*Don't do it, boy!*"

"So long, chief," McLernon grinned coldly. "Your sob act is pretty good, but it just misses. You'll be up in court on bribery charges, chief. Too bad. I'll be seeing you."

Mike McLernon opened the door and slammed out.

CHAPTER II

MYSTERY LADY

IT was late when McLernon got home, but it wasn't yet midnight and the front door to the boarding house where he lived remained unlocked, and a single light burned in the high-ceilinged, old-fashioned hallway.

The boys of the Detective Bureau had given him a dinner at Caesar's Tavern, a little Italian restaurant on South Figueroa Street. They tried to cheer him up, to pretend it wasn't a farewell dinner but merely a party. They all had advice, friendly suggestions. One of the men offered him a letter of recommendation to the chief at Kansas City; a homicide detective thought Mike'd be a cinch for a job at headquarters in Miami, Florida.

"Nix," said McLernon. "This is my town, and this is where I stick. Badge or no badge, I'll bust that Barnwell case wide open. I don't care if I starve to death doing it."

"You'd better go easy; Conant warned you."

"The hell with Conant," Mike McLernon snapped. "I'm not playing ball with crooked chiefs. He's got a card up his sleeve, but I'm going to drag it out and toss it face up on the table so everybody in town can see it. I just realized what Conant is; he's so crooked you could twist him into the cork of a wine bottle and yank it right out. He's been protecting Stoddard's rackets for over a year. Any time we boys would try to bust Stoddard, or investigate the Barnwell Case, Conant would either order us to lay off, or keep us so busy on other cases, we'd be forced to lay off."

They all said good-night to McLernon, shook hands, grinned, pretended his dismissal was only a temporary thing.

"So long, Mike," they said outside the restaurant.

"Keep your chin up, fella."

"Don't let it get you down, Mike."

He had worked side by side with them, had made arrests, raids, had charted investigations with them; had walked into the hideaway of Baby Face Dexter shoulder to shoulder with them, shooting it out with the Dexter mob.

All that was finished. There was no bringing it back. They tried to pretend the loss of his badge made no difference, but it really did. Their problems wouldn't be his any more. He didn't belong; he was all washed up.

Alone, acutely aware of his aloneness, Mike McLernon slowly climbed the steep staircase in his boarding house and keyed his way into his room. He shut the door and switched on some lights.

He kept small bachelor quarters. The furnishings amounted to bed, table, easy-chair, rug, chest of drawers, a few odds and ends, including pipes, ash trays, and pictures on the walls showing Mike being awarded a marksmanship medal, framed clippings of the cases he had broken.

Right now, Mike McLernon's rage at the chief of police no longer existed. He was a moody, unhappy, forgotten man.

He slipped out of his coat and vest, loosened his tie, rumpled his hair. He began to empty his pockets. Automatically, he reached for his badge. It wasn't there. He was sharply reminded of the fact it wasn't there.

In the same way he missed his handcuffs. He found it difficult to realize that no longer would his left hip-pocket bulge with the steel bracelets.

He hauled his gun from its belt holster, shrugged, his strong fingers turning the loaded cylinder.

Then he threw himself on the bed, on his back, laced his hands behind his head, and stared at the cracked plaster of the ceiling.

He stared for a long time, his eyes tracing the pattern of cracks as eyes might trace and follow each line of construction in a spider's web. He only half-heard the light rap of knuckles on the door.

"Come in," he called, not moving from the bed.

He'd thought it would be Mrs. Isham, his landlady, to tell him how sorry she was about his dismissal and to inquire shrewdly as to how he intended to pay his rent from now on.

It wasn't Mrs. Isham.

A VERY young lady answered his calling invitation. She didn't seem older than twenty. A red silk dress snugly hugged the lines of her figure, showed under the open black coat draped from her slim shoulders. Her shoes were dinky, high-heeled, with big black ribbons bowed on them. She wore a small black hat, cocked to one side on her blonde hair. The purse she carried was red and black, checked.

She came in swiftly, shut the door behind her, looked embarrassed, hesitant.

"I'm sorry—if I'm intruding. Perhaps this is the wrong room. I asked the landlady—she said Mr. McLernon lived in two-O-seven."

Mike McLernon swung his legs off the bed, got to his feet, trying to brush his

rumpled hair in order. "I'm McLernon," he said.

"Thank you."

She still didn't move away from the closed door.

He strode to the easy-chair, slipped it a couple of inches over the rug, said: "Won't you have a chair?"

"Well—thank you."

She accepted the chair, sat primly on the edge of it, held her checkered purse on her knees.

Mike McLernon hastened to straighten his tie, put on his vest and coat. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "I just happened to be lying down for a minute."

"That's all right," she said softly. "I guess I'm intruding."

"Not at all," Mike assured her.

He strode into the kitchenette, swinging through the door; came back with a painted wooden chair, on which he sat. "My name's McLernon," he began.

There was a moment of tight silence. She just sat primly on the edge of the easy-chair, her small, quick fingers toying with the clasp on her purse.

"Yes. I know. You're a detective."

"Used to be," Mike corrected.

"Yes. They dismissed you."

Mike McLernon nodded politely.

"Why?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Chief Conant recommended your dismissal to the commissioners, without explanation. Two years ago Patrolman Dan Barnwell lost his life trying to stop two men from escaping with stolen property from the Great Southwest Jewelry Company. It was late at night. Barnwell faced them. One, or both, of the gangsters killed him. Barnwell had a wife and three children. He gave his life trying to uphold his duty."

"Right," McLernon nodded.

"Since that time the case has been hushed up. When you men in the bureau tried to work on it, Chief Conant took you off, or made you work extra hard on some other case. All the detectives fell for it except you. You went on working regardless. You spent your nights, all your spare time, trying to find out who killed Barnwell."

McLernon nodded again, invitingly.

"What did it get you?" she asked directly.

"Dismissal," he said.

"Yes. Chief Conant fired you because you wouldn't stop working on that case. Why anything else?"

"Because," Mike McLernon told her, "Gus Stoddard runs all the grafts in this town, and, somehow, the case goes back to Stoddard. He bought Conant off. Conant would rather tie a can to my tail than see me bust a murder case that would go back to Stoddard."

She smiled. Her lips were nice, teeth nice. She let her blue eyes stray up to the cracks in the ceiling plaster. She seemed to study the ceiling. "You don't care. You intend to break the case, even though you don't wear a badge."

McLernon sat up straight in the chair. "How do you know that?"

"Didn't you go to Caesar's Tavern tonight?"

"Sure, but—"

"Then you should realize that anything you say in Caesar's will be all over town in an hour. I'm here to give you a tip."

"What tip?"

"To the Barnwell killing; to Chief Conant's protection of Gus Stoddard. Do you want to trace down the killing?"

"Sure—naturally."

"Then go to Eddie Finch. He lives at seven-nine-two San Simeon Place, over a garage."

"Who's Eddie Finch?"

"He's a dope addict. He knows something on the Barnwell killing. If you could grab him and keep him away from dope for a while, he'd beg on his hands and knees. He'd confess all he knows—anything, for dope. Will you do it?"

"Sure," McLernon agreed, "but— Well, frankly, who are you?"

She got up from the chair, slipped easily and gracefully to the door. She smiled nicely at him, said:

"I guess I'm just a stool pigeon, Mr. McLernon. Isn't that the police word for it?"

McLernon didn't believe her. Female stool pigeons were a certain type; gang molls were a certain type. This girl

didn't fit into any classification he'd ever met in police work.

"Do you mind if I ask your name?"

She opened the door, still smiling in that wise, thoughtful way. "I have no name, Mr. McLernon." Her smile became tauntingly sophisticated. "You might think of me as The Mystery Lady. Perhaps 'The Lady in Red'. Isn't that the way the newspapers refer to them?" Her laugh was softly brief. "Good-night, Mr. McLernon."

Swiftly, her slim white fingers snatched the key from the inside of the door, inserted it in the outside lock. She stepped to the hall, banged the door. McLernon heard the lock snap before he lunged across the room.

His big hands wrestled with the knob. He heard the click of high heels on the stairs in the hall. For an instant, he had the urge to shoulder the door down. Then he thought of Mrs. Isham.

The landlady wouldn't like it.

He began to bellow her name.

In less than five minutes, Mrs. Isham unlocked the door. She was a fat woman in a night robe, her gray hair tied in curl papers.

"Were you locked in?" she asked sleepily.

"Yeah," Mike grumbled, "sorry I got you up."

"That's all right, Mr. McLernon. Did the young lady find you?"

"Yeah, thanks," Mike managed.

"She seemed awfully nice, Mr. McLernon. I didn't realize you policemen had such nice friends. What was her name, Mr. McLernon? Who is she?"

McLernon suddenly noticed his landlady. "Her?" he shrugged. "Well, she's—Are you asking *me*, Mrs. Isham?"

CHAPTER III

BLACKJACK WARNING

IT was after midnight when McLernon steered his Model "A" roadster off Fifty-ninth Street into San Simeon Place. He began to slow down, looking for numbers.

Far-spaced street lamps gave little light in the shabby, sleeping district. He saw many old frame-houses standing in neglected gardens, their windows gauntly dark. Interspersed with the houses were a few one-story brick buildings, a second-hand office supply house, a Chop Suey joint, an abandoned filling station. Most of the stores were blackly empty with to-let signs and posters pasted on the show windows.

McLernon found the garage numbered 792. Its iron-grille gates were drawn, padlocked, and far inside on the greasy concrete floor, a few ancient automobiles stood in various stages of repair. A dim electric bulb, the night-light, hung over the oil-splattered tool bench.

McLernon parked his roadster just beyond the closed garage, under an old pepper tree. There was another car, a light sedan, parked opposite. Otherwise the street was deserted, dark.

He walked back, loosening the Colt in his belt holster, making sure his vest wasn't pulled down over the butt. He wore the gun under his coat on the left side, grip curving forward, and he could pull it free very swiftly with his right hand.

Steep brick steps went up the outside of the garage, in an alleyway. There was an apartment up there. Lights glowed yellow behind drawn shades, and a radio blared the "Wee Hour Dance Program" from station KTLG.

At the top of the steps, on a dark stoop, Mike McLernon rapped his knuckles vigorously on the door. Instantly, the radio was tuned low. Shoes scurried faintly over flooring like the sound of rats in an old attic.

McLernon rapped again.

"Yeah!" a voice called growlingly. "I'm coming; keep your shirt on!"

The door opened only six inches. The man standing behind it was bald-headed, tall, angular. A long time ago he'd had an accident that got his left eye. The eyeball had a glassy, fishlike appearance.

"Whatcha want?" he grumbled.

"I want to see Eddie Finch," Mike said.

"Yeah? What for?"

"That's something I'll take up with Eddie."

The bald man grunted nastily. "Smart guy, huh?"

It didn't bother McLernon. He just grinned coldly, said: "Sure, I'm the original."

"Tough, too," the man snarled sarcastically. "I'll bet you're awful tough."

McLernon kept grinning. "Right again. Want to try me?"

The bald man shifted his feet hesitantly, doubtfully. "Who are you?" he asked.

"That's still something I'll take up with Eddie Finch."

"Yeah? Well, suppose *I'm* Eddie Finch?"

Mike laughed briefly. "Suppose you aren't?"

The man snorted: "Hair-on-the-chest, huh?"

"I'll say," Mike agreed. "It gives me a lot of trouble. I have to keep trimming it off with a lawn mower."

The bald man stepped back, opening the door in wide invitation. "Come in. Maybe I can help you trim it."

McLernon went in. He had his right hand ready to draw his gun, his eyes fixed steadily on the bald man. But he wasn't prepared for the second man.

The second man lunged at him from beyond the opened door. The descending blackjack, t h u d d i n g against skull, knocked McLernon down, but it didn't knock him out.

McLernon rolled over on the floor, tackled the bald man's legs and spilled him. The second man jumped on McLernon, yelling: "Grab his rod, Fish-eye!"

Fish-eye grabbed it. McLernon tried to roll away from the thudding blackjack. As soon as Fish-eye had the Colt, they both stood up and grinned down at him.

"He's awful tough, ain't he, Monk?" Fish-eye growled smugly.

"I'll say," Monk agreed in the same crude sarcasm. "He's practically the toughest guy I ever smeared."

Fish-eye fingered out the cylinder in McLernon's Colt, ejected the cartridges, and handed the gun back to McLernon with sweeping politeness.

The man called "Monk" had the build of a heavyweight wrestler, yet his thick muscles worked with a speed McLernon had never seen in a wrestling ring. The man yanked papers from McLernon's pockets, looked at them.

"Know who this guy is, Fish-eye? He's Mike McLernon. He's the copper the chief canned today."

"Yeah?"

McLernon got up off the floor, straightened his coat, adjusted his tie. His brain ignored the pain the blackjack had shot through his skull.

Fish-eye said: "I'm Eddie Finch. What do you want to see me about?"

"You're not Eddie Finch," Mike told him, "you're *Fish-eye.*"

The bald man grinned. "Fish-eye? That's just a nickname my buddy here calls me. My real name is Eddie Fish-eye Finch. Ain't it, Monk?"

McLernon grinned pleasantly. At the same time he backed slowly across the room. "Well, I'll tell you, Eddie," he said slowly, "it's very important. I've got to tell you in confidence . . . ."

ALL that time McLernon was backing slowly toward a door, beyond which he had heard a low, muttering groan. "It's like this, Eddie . . . ."

He whirled and yanked the door open before they knew what he was doing. It was a closet. A thin scrawny man lay crumpled on the floor, bound with ropes, gagged with a wadded handkerchief.

Mike turned around again as the two men approached him crouchingly, steadily. Mike said:

"My guess is that this guy in here is Eddie Finch. Fish-eye doesn't look like a dope addict; this scrawny guy does."

Mike got his gun out swiftly. It was empty, but he used it as a club, slashing the barrel down on Fish-eye's bald head.

The other man, Monk, closed in with his blackjack. For a wild moment, Mike McLernon held them both off.

McLernon was a big, lean, healthy man, and he stood a good chance, even against odds. He fought hard and fast. He ducked Monk's swishing blackjack, jabbed a fighter's left fist into Monk's

belly. As Monk staggered back, gasping for breath, grunting, McLernon dived at Fish-eye.

Fish-eye threw a small chair at him. The chair bounced off McLernon's shoulder, broke on the floor. McLernon slammed his empty gun at Fish-eye's jaw. In the meantime, Monk had turned up the radio to blast music over any noise the fight made. Monk tossed his blackjack away and slipped his hamlike fists into a pair of brass knuckles.

Then he lashed out at McLernon.

McLernon went down under the slugging, but he still fought. He cracked Fish-eye's shin with the empty gun, tried to get up.

The three of them staggered, fought, smashed, slugged, all over the room. Furniture tipped over before their stamping feet, their lurching bodies. Two pictures jolted off the wall. The sound of slugging, heavy breathing, grunting, gasping, was the only sound in the room over the loud radio.

McLernon lost his gun and lunged back into the battle with bare fists. Blood trickled from a corner of his mouth, from his forehead, matted his rumpled hair. He kept fighting, dodging, and Monk continued to swing at him with the brass knuckles.

Fish-eye took a flying leap, locked his arms around McLernon's neck. The two of them spilled backwards to a battered davenport, hit it so hard the heavy piece of furniture crashed over with their sprawling, fighting weight.

"Lemme at him!" Monk yelled, and his brass knuckles recommenced the thudding roar on McLernon's skull.

McLernon couldn't hold out any longer against the two of them. He flayed his fists in a last desperate attempt to defend himself. Then he sagged. Under the smashing blows, his brain whirled without clear thought. New cuts on his forehead flooded his eyes with his own blood.

"Had enough yet?" Fish-eye snarled.

McLernon kicked out violently and sent Fish-eye staggering. "I haven't begun yet!"

But he was finished. Monk continued to hammer him. Fish-eye stood over him, giving him the boot, kicking his ribs. McLernon couldn't get up. Every time he tried, they beat him, slugged him, kicked him to the floor again.

Instinctively, half-conscious, he rolled slowly to his face, wrapped his arms about his head to ward off their hard-kicking shoes, the blows of the brass knuckles. After a while he lay still. He couldn't move.

"How about it, tough guy?" Fish-eye laughed. "Does that trim some of the hair off your chest?"

McLernon wagged his head groggily.

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Monk said. "I know what you're after, ex-copper. You want to crack the Barnwell Case. Conant gave you the sack, but you're still poking your nose around. That's why you want to see Eddie Finch. Well, get this; we're telling you to lay off!"

McLernon didn't answer.

Fish-eye drew his leg back and kicked hard into McLernon's side, so hard that the prone body lurched, shuddered.

"You're not a copy any more, see? You better get a nice job collecting garbage, or something."

"I'll collect the garbage, all right!" Mike managed to mutter.

Fish-eye kicked him again. "Still tough, huh? Still smart? Okay, but we're telling you for the last time—lay off, big guy!"

They hit him, just once now, but it felt as though they'd hit him on the head with the radio. The blow forced his teeth against the floor, split his lips.

He still wasn't out. He could hear them moving around, dragging Eddie Finch from the closet. But he couldn't make his muscles respond.

"So long, hairy chest!" Fish-eye called.

McLERNON got to his feet. It seemed to him that he got up almost the moment they went out the door. Yet he knew it was longer, maybe ten minutes. He wiped his face in the crook of his arm. His sleeve came away bloody. His own breathing was the only sound in the apartment.

He found his Colt, and with trembling fingers, slipped cartridges into the cylinder chambers; jammed the gun into the holster.

Going to the front door, he staggered weakly to his hands and knees, but he got up again almost instantly. He braced himself against the wall, shook his head to get the fog out. Then, he opened the door, weaved out on the stoop and dragged the sharply cold night air into his lungs as he groped down the steps.

On the sidewalk he saw that the sedan was gone. He glanced both ways on the street, noticed a dark, small figure slip out of sight on the other side of the garage.

He swung into a fast stride, dodged down the far alley. She was fleeing just ahead of him. He reached out, grabbed her arm, stopped her.

"Going some place?" he rapped out.

"Well, I—"

"You might get lost in this alley," he told her with cold irony. "Maybe I'd better show you where the street is."

He couldn't see her in the dark. He only felt the softness of her arm, felt her indecisive pull.

"Are you—" she faltered. "Are you Mr. McLernon?"

"Yeah." His voice still carried that low, biting sarcasm. "And *you*—you're the mystery lady. You're the 'Lady in Red'. Right?"

"Well—"

"*Stool pigeon* was the other word you used for it. I guess that was the best one, after all."

He guided her firmly up the alley to the sidewalk, down toward the pepper tree. For an instant she tried to escape from his grasp, failed.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To my car," he said.

He opened the right-hand door of the car. She pushed a hand into his face, suddenly. He picked her up in his arms. She seemed very light. He dropped her into the seat, slammed the door.

"Don't try to get out," he warned her, "or I'll just pick you up and dump you back again."

She didn't move, became a small, dark figure slumped down in the seat while he ran around the roadster, slid in under the wheel, started the motor.

She said nervously: "I've got a car myself. It's just around the corner. It's just— If you don't mind—"

"Leave it," he clipped. "Forget about it. You're going with me."

"With you?"

He nodded, shoving the gear into low.

"Where? I mean—"

"You and I'll go some place and park," he told her evasively.

CHAPTER IV

STRANGE ALLY

THE ex-dick drove half a mile over dark streets. She said nothing, crouching in the corner of the seat, away from him, by the door.

He parked the roadster in a block where there was nothing but vacant lots, a couple of billboards. He shut the switch and faced her. The drone of crickets came from the weed-grown lots. Far off, the bell of a night-owl trolley clanged for a crossing.

"Well," said Mike, "here we are."

She held her purse on her knees. Suddenly, swiftly, she had groped into it, and a small nickel-plated automatic was pointed at McLernon.

He raised his hands in surrender, then he seemed to be staring over her shoulder. "Look!" he exclaimed.

She looked instinctively, saw nothing but the dark empty lots. McLernon's right hand smacked sharply downward on her wrist. He caught the small gun in his left hand, spun it, tucked it in his pocket. It was fast. She jumped a little, stared at him in amazement.

"Holy Smoke!" he chuckled pleasantly. "I learned that trick in kindergarten. I didn't think anybody still fell for it."

For a moment, she couldn't adapt herself to the turn of events. One second she'd had a gun pointed at him; the next second, she hadn't.

"Give me my pistol back!" she demanded angrily.

McLernon grinned. "Sorry—no can do. You might hurt somebody with it."

"Give it back!"

He wagged his head. "Sorry."

She planted her high-heeled shoes firmly on the floorboards of the roadster, bunched small fists on her knees, as she demanded: *"What do you want?"*

"To know who you are, mystery lady —'Lady in Red'—stool pigeon."

Now her eyes had got accustomed to the darkness. She saw his face clearly, saw him mopping at his split mouth, his forehead with a handkerchief that was wadded and damply red.

"Oh," she said, "oh!" in surprise.

"What?"

"You're hurt."

"Sure," he laughed. "Isn't that what you wanted when you sent me up there to see Eddie Finch?"

"No; I only meant—"

He related what had happened, recited it coldly, tonelessly, added: "It isn't what you expected?"

"No!"

"Didn't you want to trap me with those mugs, have them tell me to lay off the Barnwell Case?"

"No—I give you my word."

"The word of a stool pigeon?" he taunted.

"No—*my* word. I didn't know you'd get into trouble. I thought you'd just find Eddie Finch. You've *got* to believe me. If I just wanted those men to beat you up, why would I give you the name of Eddie Finch? You admit there *was* an Eddie Finch, don't you?"

McLernon nodded briefly. "Eddie was tied in a closet."

"Then," she rushed on breathlessly, "you know you can trust me. I don't know anything about those two men. I guess you talked too much at Caesar's Tavern. You said you were going to break the case. That's how I heard about it—maybe that's how they heard about it. So they tried to sneak Eddie Finch away. They didn't count on my tip. You got there too soon. They beat you up."

McLernon couldn't deny the soundness of her reasoning. He thought it over. Finally, he said:

"Okay, I'll admit you want to see the Barnwell Case broken and you're using me as the instrument. The Case goes back to Gus Stoddard. Maybe he did you some dirt one time. You want to get back at him."

"I never had anything to do with Gus Stoddard," she corrected.

"All right," McLernon nodded. "The next person this investigation hits is William J. Conant, the chief of police."

"Yes," she said.

"You want to break the chief?"

"Yes," she assured him tensely.

"Why?"

"For personal reasons, very personal."

"He did something to you?"

"Never! He's a fine man."

"But you want to expose him?"

"Yes."

"Why?" McLernon demanded.

"I don't care to state."

McLernon reached over and snatched her purse from her lap. She tried to get it back, but he tucked it beyond her reach.

"Look," he said, "I want to know who you are. I've got to know why you intend to break Conant." He added pointedly: "If you won't volunteer your name, then I'll search this for some kind of identification."

SHE didn't answer. The profile of her face showed in clear silhouette against the vague glow of night. The tilt of her chin was aloof.

"Listen," he said, "we might as well compare notes. It seems we both want to break the Barnwell Case and break Conant, the chief's a grafting politician. He fired me for trying to work on the case, but I don't intend to let that stop me."

"I know," she agreed softy. "That's why I picked you for just the man to give the tip to. The Barnwell killing was a terrible thing, and it ought to be solved. But that isn't my real purpose."

He nodded understandingly. "Sure. Your real purpose is to see Conant's secret dragged out."

"Yes."

"Then do you know what the secret is? I mean, do you know how he's connected with the case and what Gus Stoddard has on him?"

She shook her head. "No—but I'll find out. We'll both find out."

"And we'll break the chief?"

She hesitated, seemed to slump deeper in the roadster's leather cushions. For a moment, McLernon got the idea she was crying soundlessly. "Yes," she whispered with determination, "yes!"

"Good. Let's shake on it."

Her hand felt small in his grasp.

McLernon cleared his throat, returned to the important question again. "Now that we're working together, what's your name—your real name?"

"Persistent, aren't you, Mr. McLernon?" She shrugged, didn't look at him. Her voice had a nervously worried huskiness. "I'll tell you. But you won't believe it."

"Try me," he invited.

"My name," she told him slowly, "is Helen Conant."

Mike McLernon sat forward tensely, suddenly. *"What?"*

She shrugged in resignation. "I told you you wouldn't believe me. Open my bag, if you like. There's lots of identification in it. See for yourself."

For a little while, he didn't speak, didn't move. It was incredible; yet he believed her. He handed the purse back to her, without opening it. "I've heard of you, Miss Conant. You're his daughter."

He knew more about her. He knew that her mother had died when she was six. He knew that Chief Conant had sent her to the best Eastern private schools; that she had been raised by an aunt. He said:

"You want to break, *expose,* your own father?"

"Yes." Now she became aloofly sophisticated again. "Rather unusual, isn't it, Mr. McLernon?"

Vigorously, he tucked his damply red handkerchief away in his pocket, stroked his jaw thoughtfully. "I'll say it is. It's—Well, it changes everything. I guess I can't take your tips after all, Miss Conant."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's hitting the old chief below the belt. I can't use the help of his own daughter to trap him."

"Oh," she taunted, "I thought you hated him. I thought you wanted to get back at him for firing you."

"Sure," he agreed. "I intend to slap the old grafter down, but I want to fight fair. A long time ago, he was a friend of my father. After my father died, he sort of watched over me and my brother Jeffrey. Now the chief's gone to the dogs, and I plan to expose him, but I can't hit him below the belt. He worships you. It'd kill him if he found out you were working against him."

McLernon broke off. His big hands rubbed the steering wheel in nervous decision. "Well, I can't do it that way, that's all." He swung around in the seat, faced her challengingly. "Funny thing; you don't look like the type of girl to knife her own father in the back."

"I'm not knifing him!" she snapped defensively.

He gave a short, bitter laugh. "What do you call it when you try to prove he's a grafter protecting murderers and cop-killers—when he's covering Gus Stoddard's rackets?"

"I'm helping him," she said with conviction. "Listen, I'll tell you the honest truth. Dad was always a fine officer, a fine man. But after that Barnwell killing, he changed. I knew something was the matter. I've heard things, seen things, that show he's covering up the case and stopping investigations. I don't know why, but I suppose he finally gave in and took bribe money. He hates the whole situation. He's eating his heart out. He can't sleep nights. His doctor says he may have a nervous breakdown."

McLernon nodded coldly. "That's the price a once-straight law officer has to pay when he turns crook."

"I know—I know! But he can't face it. I've begged him to confess, to quit his job—anything. But he keeps the secret locked up in his heart, eating away inside of him, ruining his health, his nerves. I've heard him speak of you. He's always been fond of you and your brother, as he was fond of your father. He hated to dismiss you, because he said you were the best detective they ever had in the bureau. But whatever his secret is, it's so important that he'd rather dismiss good detectives than have them drag the secret out."

"All grafting officers have to cover themselves that way," Mike said.

"Perhaps—but I intend to drag the secret out and get it over with."

"It'll wreck his career," Mike warned.

"I don't care about his career; I care about him as a man, as a father. His job, the way it is now, isn't making him happy. It's better for him to be out of it altogether, than to go on like he is. So I don't mind upsetting his career, if it gives him back his self-respect. I went to you because I can't handle it alone. It's a man's job. Gus Stoddard is somehow mixed up in this, and I know he'll try to interfere with whatever we do. But I thought you'd help. Will you, or do you still doubt my motives?"

"I don't doubt you," Mike said.

"Shake again?"

He took her small hand, grinned. "All right. Here we go. We'll drag the secret out. We'll find out the killers of Dan Barnwell, the guys who robbed the store. And we'll smear Gus Stoddard and all his rackets for a loss."

"Right," she agreed firmly, but there was a little catch in her throat. "By tomorrow, I'll find out where they're hiding Eddie Finch, and tell you. It'll be a fight."

Mike McLernon shrugged. "Bucking Gus Stoddard is always a fight. Even the chief told me I was walking straight to my own doom. Two stumble bums gave me a taste of it, already." He touched his split lips, gingerly felt his aching skull.

"Afraid?" she asked.

"Do *you* think so?"

"No." She offered her hand again, smiling bravely. He saw the faint glisten of tears in her eyes. "Let's go, Mike!"

"Sure," he said. "Let's go, Helen."

CHAPTER V

THE MURDER FAMILY

MIKE McLERNON walked up to the front door of the boarding house where he lived. It was unlocked. He went into the dimly lit hall, climbed the stairs, not making any sound. He didn't want to wake Mrs. Isham.

He walked along the carpeted corridor on the second floor. A sliver of light showed under the door to his rooms. He didn't need his key; the knob turned under his hand.

"Hello," he greeted, instantly puzzled and suspicious.

He had three visitors. His brother Jeffrey sat slumped dejectly in the big

chair, avoiding Mike's eyes. The chief of police, not in uniform now, sat fatly on the edge of the bed; he looked more worried, more harassed, than ever.

The other man was Gus Stoddard.

"Hello," McLernon said again, and carefully shut the door behind him.

Chief Conant gave a slight, nervous cough into his pudgy palm. "Hello, Mike. I guess this is kind of unexpected. We had to see you, and your landlady sent us up here to wait." He made a vague little gesture toward Stoddard. "Did you ever meet Gus, Mike? This is Gus Stoddard."

The racketeer was a bulky-bodied man, over-dressed. He had perched himself atop the dresser, and sat hunched there, toying with a silver cigarette case. He hadn't removed his hat; the brim of it curved down sharply, putting his eyes in shadow. The very way he perched on the dresser gave the impression of smug self-assurance.

Mike McLernon said grimly: "I've seen him around town—I've never met him."

Stoddard grinned with one side of his mouth, touched the brim of his hat in a sort of mocking salute. "Hi, McLernon."

For long seconds the room had an unfortably tense silence. McLernon looked from one to the other, studied them, as though trying to peer deep into their minds and discover for himself the purpose of the visit.

Finally, he glanced over at his brother and said: "How've you been Jeff?"

Jeffrey McLernon still didn't raise his downcast eyes. He was a youngish man, six years younger than Mike. He didn't have Mike's build or Mike's strong features. His face was clean-cut but narrow, his hands slim and long-fingered. He worked his hands together, concentrated on making sharp cracking sounds with his knuckles. When he spoke, his voice was mutteringly nervous.

"I'm pretty good, Mike. How're you?"

Mike didn't answer that. His eyes stayed fixed on his brother. "How's the wife, Jeff?"

"She's—she's just fine."

Their conversation was the veiled kind, tight, hesitant. Mike said with forced casualness: "Did you just happen to meet these gentlemen up here, Jeff?"

Jeffrey McLernon cracked his knuckles, shook his head slowly, still not looking up at Mike. "No—I came with them. We came together."

Mike's eyes narrowed. "Do you know Stoddard?"

Over on the bed, Chief Conant rumpled his gray hair with a trembling hand, like a man who foresees torture about to ensnare some one close to him.

Gus Stoddard remained smugly grinning, cocky. He tossed the cigarette case lightly into the air, caught it. He did it again, thoroughly enjoying himself, playing catch with himself.

Jeffrey lowered his head. "Yeah, Mike—I know Stoddard."

"Sure," Stoddard cut in briskly. "Jeff and me are just a couple of buddies, uh, Jeff? He's a great kid, Mike; you got a great brother." His grin was like ice now, as he watched Mike McLernon. "Sure, Jeff and his wife—they make a sweet pair. I feel like a father to 'em."

Mike tensed. His hands became tightly knotted fists, his arms rigid at his sides. He glared at Gus Stoddard. "Okay," he snapped, "cut all the wise stuff—and lay off baiting me. What you got up your sleeve?"

Stoddard stopped playing catch with the cigarette case, pulled his cuff away from his wrist, and mockingly peered down. "Up the sleeve? Nothing up there at all. Just my arm."

"Lay off, damn it!" Mike barked. "Speak your piece! What kind of dirt are you going to pull on me?"

Stoddard leaned back against the wall and crudely pretended to be insulted. "Why, that's a nasty way to treat your friends, Mike. I'm ashamed of you! Just when we come to help you, too."

"Help do what?" Mike demanded.

"Why, solve the Barnwell Case, of course. You want to solve it, don't you?"

When Mike McLernon didn't answer, he went on: "We're just trying to be helpful, and you go and insult us. It's enough to discourage even a friendly guy

like me. I don't like to be friendly with guys that insult me."

Mike snapped: "Speak your piece!"

STODDARD'S shoulders shrugged in the trimly tailored fit of his overcoat. His expression remained boldly and bitingly sarcastic. "All right, Mike. Now Barnwell was killed by three bullets out of a thirty-eight. Two guys tried to clean out the safe at the jewelry store, and Patrolman Barnwell got in the way. Both guys never got identified. Now Chief Conant here has the bullets the autopsy surgeon took out of Barnwell's body. Haven't you, chief?"

Mike McLernon waved a hand impatiently. "Sure, he's got the bullets. I saw them in the Ballistics Bureau myself. What good does that do? We don't know where the gun is. The bullets won't prove anything, unless we get a gun to compare them with."

"Sure," Stoddard agreed, aping McLernon's voice. "The bullets are steel-jacketed thirty-eights. They've got rifling marks that show up under a microscope. But it doesn't help you solve the case, because you don't have the gun. That's why I came here. I can help you." He leaned forward, grinning broadly. *"I've got the gun!"*

"Mike McLernon stared at him. *"You've* got it?"

"Sure. All you have to do is take it to the bureau and have it tested. They'll tell you it's the thirty-eight that fired the slugs that killed Barnwell. And when you check up the serial numbers on the gun, you'll find only one man owned it—and that man will confess he killed Barnwell with it."

"Where is it?" Mike demanded.

Stoddard saluted mockingly again. "Right here—right in my pocket." His groping hand came out with a nickel-plated revolver. He didn't pass it to McLernon, just showed it. The gun was distinctive, with special pearl stocks. "Ever see that before?" Stoddard asked.

McLernon stared. For a second shock held him rigid.

He'd seen the gun before; in fact, he himself had been the original purchaser of it. He'd ordered it direct from the factory and had secured a county permit made out in the name of Jeffrey McLernon. It had been a Christmas gift, complete with a box of cartridges, to his brother when Jeff first got his job as night attendant at a gas station.

McLernon's mind raced in a dizzy maze. He couldn't believe it. There had to be some explanation—some different solution. The present facts couldn't be true.

He whirled and faced his brother. "Jeff—give me the lowdown. Did you loan it to somebody?" He snapped his fingers. "Sure, that's it. You loaned it to some friend. The guy went out and cracked the jewelry store with a pal. The guy used your gun to kill a cop. Is that the answer, Jeff?"

Jeffrey McLernon slumped limply in the chair, sank his face into his spread hands. *"No,* Mike . . . ."

"No?"

"I used it myself," he confessed shuddering. "I was one of the men who broke in the store. I was that man that shot the cop. I did it myself, alone."

Mike McLernon still wouldn't believe it. He looked hopefully at Chief Conant, expecting some explanation. There wasn't any. Conant avoided Mike's eyes, stared stonily at the floor.

Mike spun around and faced Gus Stoddard. The racketeer wagged his head in mock sympathy.

Then Mike strode over to his brother. "Jeff, you're lying. You've covering somebody!"

Jeffrey's shoulder squirmed under his brother's clutch. "No, Mike. If you had any sense, you'd realize it. Who would I cover? This doesn't just wreck me; it wrecks my wife. There isn't anybody in the world I'd cover at Martha's expense —not even you. I'm guilty as hell."

The ex-lieutenant rubbed his forehead, as though trying to get himself awake from a nightmare. He was like some jungle animal caught in a trapper's cage. His eyes flashed around the room, seeking some escape from the problem.

There wasn't any escape. Chief Conant still stared at the floor—Jeff stared at the floor. They didn't speak.

Gus Stoddard eased himself from the dresser, tucked the gun back in his coat pocket. "Well, Mike McLernon," he gloated, "this is a family affair now, I guess—no place for me. I'll just barge along. Sorry, old pal. Let me know if there's anything I can do. If you want to trap the Barnwell killer, I'll be glad to lend a hand. I'll take this gun into court with you as evidence. Personally, I hate a cop-killer, but your brother's a great kid, and I'll play ball with you—if you want it that way."

He laughed, and Mike McLernon cut the laugh off with a stiff right to the jaw. The racketeer's teeth clacked together under the blow; his head bounced back sharply against the wall.

The racketeer made no gesture toward returning the fight, but his eyebrows drew together in frowning rage.

"You'll wish you never did that!" he mouthed threateningly. "I'll cut your damn' guts out and feed 'em back to you with gravy!"

AFTER Gus Stoddard had gone, the room stayed silent for a long time. Neither Jeffrey McLernon, nor the chief of police, made the slightest movement.

The ex-detective began to pace the room, to pace it in quick, impatient strides. Up and down, he went, back and forth; over to the kitchenette door, back to the dresser, across to the window.

Chief Conant watched him.

Finally, Mike McLernon came to a sudden stop, facing the chief. "I know the answer now. I know why you smuggled the Barnwell Case into the unsolved files. I know why you kept the boys off the case; why you even fired me when I seemed to be getting too hot on the investigation."

The chief didn't speak. He looked very old, very tired.

Mike said: "You were doing it for me all the time. You took graft from Stoddard, protected his rackets, turned yourself into a crooked law official—and you did it all on account of me, my brother, and my dead father."

Conant moved his fat shoulders, uncomfortably. "I'm sorry I couldn't manage to hide it, Mike. When I fired you, I figured you'd lay off. I never figured you'd go on forcing the investigation."

"You fired me for my own good," Mike McLernon went on. "You let me call you every rotten name I could think of. You let me think you were a dirty, grafting chief. You took it all on the chin, risked your job, let me bust our friendship, everything—and all because you wanted to keep me from finding out my brother was a cop-killer."

Conant reached for his hat, twisted it in pudgy fingers. "I'm sorry I failed, Mike." He cleared his throat huskily. "But I think we can fix it up with Stoddard. He needs my protection. Let *me* handle it; you're too hot-headed."

"Nix," said Mike firmly, his jaw muscles throbbing. "It's *my* job from now on, chief. I can't thank you for what you've done; anything I say is dumb compared to what you've done."

Chief Conant shuffled his feet awkwardly. "That's nothing, Mike. Your father, if he still lived—he'd do the same for one of my kids."

Mike took a grip on Chief Conant's arm, piloted him to the hall door, gently pushed him out. "I want to talk to my brother," he said slowly. "Good-night, chief."

"Good-night, Mike."

The door latch clicked softly.

McLernon turned around, said: "What did you do it for, Jeff?"

Jeffrey s h u d d e r e d, cracked his knuckles. "I guess I needed the dough."

"You had a job, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but Martha's operation cost a lot: more than I could make in a year at the gas station."

"Then why didn't you come to me?"

"Well, I couldn't, Mike. I knew what your salary was. I already owed you two thousand. I couldn't ask for *more*."

"Tell me about it—everything."

Jeffrey talked in a low monotone. "I met this fellow, Eddie Finch."

"Eddie Finch?"

Jeffrey nodded. "At the gas station. I got to know him, and he told me how easy it would be for us to crack the safe at the Great Southwest Jewelry Com-

pany. So I got out the gun you gave me. I'd never shot it; I don't know anything about guns. It took me ten minutes to figure out how to get the cartridges in."

"So then what?" Mike pursued grimly.

"We busted the store. Martha thought I'd gone to lodge meeting. Eddie Finch and I sneaked out into the alley, and this cop came up all of a sudden. The cop said:

"'Stop, you boys; I'm an officer!'

"My stomach jumped in my throat, and Eddie Finch yelled: 'Get him, Jeff!'

"I shot at the cop, emptied the gun at him." Jeffrey began to sob into his spread hands. "Good Lord, I didn't mean to kill him, Mike! Dad was a cop. I never even fired a gun before. I was scared, and Eddie Finch yelled at me. So I shot."

Mike McLernon's face was a rigid white mask as he listened. "Did Eddie Finch shoot too?"

"Sure."

"Then maybe it was Eddie who killed him?"

Jeffrey shook his head, winced, tried to keep his voice level. "No. Eddie shot in the air, just to scare the cop. Afterwards, he said he expected I'd do the same. He said I was just green."

"Maybe he's a liar," Mike growled.

"No, he's right. The papers said Officer Barnwell was shot with thirty-eight caliber bullets. My gun was that size."

"What was Eddie's?" Mike asked.

"His was a forty-five."

"How do you know?"

"He showed it to me." Jeffrey stared stonily at the carpet. "I was plenty scared, Mike. Eddie Finch said the only thing to do was to get rid of my gun so the police would never find it. He said I'd never have to worry about him squealing on me. He took the pistol."

"Yours?"

"Yeah," Jeffrey gulped. "He said he could ditch it so it would never be found, but in less than three days, Stoddard had it. Stoddard came to see me. He told me he'd paid Eddie Finch a thousand dollars for it; that now my future was in his hands.

"First, I thought he intended to blackmail me, but he only laughed and said the kind of money he could get from me wouldn't even pay his carfare. He said as long as I behaved myself he wouldn't turn in the gun."

Mike McLernon nodded. "Sure, he was playing for big game. He'd always failed in getting protection for his rackets because Chief Conant couldn't be bought. But now he went to Conant and demanded protection or he'd take the murder gun to the D.A. He knew Conant would weaken in order to save you and me."

JEFFREY looked squarely at his older brother. "That's right, Mike. I've made a mess of things. I'm glad Dad isn't living to see it. I tried to live honorable after I killed the cop, but I can't keep the secret any longer. I'm washed up, Mike. I can't look Martha in the face any more. I'm a dirty rat." His voice choked up. "I'm not afraid for myself. But I hate to hurt Martha. And at the same time, I know this can't go on. Chief Conant turned crooked to cover me, and to keep you from finding out the truth. I can't let that go on. You lost your job . . . ."

"The hell with my job," Mike clipped.

Jeffrey shook his head in final futility. "No, Mike. I can't go on and let honest people cover me. This is the end."

"Of what?"

"Me. I know what the next step has to be."

"Next step?" Mike asked doubtfully.

"Yeah. You get the evidence on me as Barnwell's killer. Get the gun from Stoddard. You and Chief Conant can work together. You'll both nail me, bring me into court; I'll confess. That'll be the end of Stoddard's protection on his rackets. Conant can be a square chief again. You'll get your job back."

Mike McLernon stared in amazement. He didn't know what to say. He just scrubbed at the nape of his neck, vigorously, self-consciously. Finally, he said:

"You mean I'm supposed to convict my own brother?"

Jeffrey got up and edged for the door. "Yeah. It's the only out, Mike."

"Why, you poor sap," Mike grumbled.

Jeffrey smiled tightly, shook his head, briefly put a hand on Mike's shoulder.

"It's the only answer . . . . I'll give you three days to be a good cop."

"I'm not a cop at all; I'm fired," Mike reminded him.

"You're still a cop—like Dad was. I'll give you three days to get the dope on me, Mike."

"Suppose I don't?" Mike demanded pointedly.

"Then you're a rotten cop, and I'll walk into the district attorney's office and confess anyway. There's your choice, Mike. And if you're a good cop, you'll do your duty. You'll *get* me."

"You poor sap," Mike repeated feebly.

"I'm more than a poor sap, Mike. I'm the big heel in the McLernon family. I'm the weak sister, the cop-killer, the rat. But there's one thing about the McLernons— even when we're rats, we still know how to face the music. I'm going to face the music, Mike. And if you have any guts, you'll forget they took your badge away; you'll close in on me, nail the evidence, arrest me, take me to court, see me convicted. I'm a cop-killer heading for the gallows."

Jeffrey opened the door, stepped into the hall. He smiled back at Mike, said: "So long, copper; I'll be seeing you in court."

Mike heard his brother's shoes hammering down the stairs. He just stood there, staring at the closed door. He rubbed a hand over his face, trying to wipe away the foggy nightmare. It wouldn't wipe away. No matter how hard he rubbed, the facts remained tauntingly in front of him.

"All right," he said finally, speaking huskily to the door panels, "I'm out to get you, Jeff. Too bad, kid. But I can't help it. *I'm out to get you.*"

CHAPTER VI

Beauty Baits a Trap

HE couldn't sleep. Noon came, and he still couldn't sleep. He knew what his job was. Badge or no badge, the pressure of definite duty squeezed him; brother or no brother, he had to act.

Patrolman Barnwell had died in the course of his duty. That fact alone demanded action. Barnwell had sacrificed everything for the tradition of law and order. He had died in a blue uniform, with brass buttons, a badge. It wasn't the uniform that counted, nor the brass buttons, nor the badge. It wasn't the death of a single man whom the world would soon forget.

It was an issue. Forgetting Barnwell would be retreating before the menace of lawlessness.

The job was Mike McLernon's now. He could live up to tradition, avenging a brother officer—or he could cover his actual brother by refusing to act.

He really had no choice. His course of action was clear to him; even his brother had seen it . . . .

At nine that night, somebody tapped knuckles against the door panels.

"Come in," Mike McLernon called.

It was Helen Conant. She wore a fur-trimmed coat, a hat with a trick crown. He fully realized how beautiful she was.

"Any news?" she asked.

He shook his head slowly. He couldn't bring himself to tell her the hard, ironic, twist the case had taken. Sooner or later she'd find out, and he didn't want to talk about it now.

For her part, she'd learn that her father's protection of Stoddard's rackets, his many attempts to suppress investigations of the Barnwell affair, had not come from bribe money. It would make her happy to know the truth.

But in the meantime, Mike McLernon had to face the toughest problem of his life.

"No news," he said gravely.

"That doesn't matter," she told him, "*I've* got enough news for both of us." The lights in the room seemed to make little glitters of excitement in her eyes. "In the first place, I know who the two men are."

He stared deeply. Did she mean she knew the identities of the two who broke into the jewelry store? Did she know it was Eddie Finch and Mike's own brother? Had she somehow learned the facts?

"What two men?" he asked huskily.

"The ones with the silly nicknames," she told him, and he was relieved.

"The rest of their names are Rafferty and Davis. Their regular job is acting as bouncers for Gus Stoddard's night club."

"The Ten Mile House?"

She nodded. "Furthermore, they're both at the club now, and I think they're holding Eddie Finch a prisoner there."

McLernon gave a short whistle. "How'd you promote all that?"

"From the beginning?"

"That's always a good place to start," he said, and smiled.

"Well, you see, I know Gus Stoddard. He's—sort of an acquaintance. I met him through Dad one day. Gus thinks he likes me. Of course, I can't stand the sight of him; but Dad told me never to antagonize him. Otherwise, I wouldn't ever go out with a person like Gus. About a week ago I was dancing with him at the club. He'd asked me so many times, and I couldn't refuse any longer without insulting him. Anyway, that's when I learned about Eddie Finch."

"He told you?"

"No, I overheard a conversation. He told a man that he didn't like the idea of a dope addict like Eddie holding the answer to the Barnwell killing. The man said it was probably all right as long as they kept Finch full of joy powder. Gus Stoddard said: 'Well, maybe it's all right, but I don't like it. If anybody ever got wise and took him off the dope, he'd spill everything he knows'."

"Then what?" Mike asked.

"The man said to Gus: 'He won't spill; how could he afford to do that? But if you want, I'll keep an eye on him. Where does he hang out?' So Gus gave the man the address, and I remembered it. That's how I had it to give to you."

McLernon nodded thoughtfully. "Now how about Rafferty and Davis—the big muscle-boys?"

"WELL, tonight at the club I heard them calling each other by those nicknames you heard at Eddie Finch's place. I inquired who they were. I pretended I thought they were champion wrestlers. A waiter told me they were the club's bouncers."

"You went to the club this evening?"

"Yes—early. I reasoned that as long as Gus Stoddard is tied up in this case, then his club was the best place to hang around in order to get information."

"Swell," McLernon approved. "What else?"

"Well, I think they're holding Eddie Finch there. I saw this big man Rafferty pick up a tray of food from the kitchens and go to Gus Stoddard's private office with it. I had the hunch it might be dinner for Finch."

"Maybe it was just for Stoddard."

"No, Stoddard was out at the bar, and if the dinner was just for a club customer, why wouldn't a waiter take it? So after that hunch, I went to the office and opened the door. The office was empty."

"Empty?"

"Yes, but the rug was pulled back. There's a trap door to a basement. Gus showed it to me once when he was explaining how he used to stow liquor there during Prohibition."

McLernon snapped his fingers. "Nice going. Does anybody know you're wise?"

"I'm positive they don't. Now my idea is that we both go to the club, but not together. I can lure Gus from the office. When both those men are outside, too, then you can slip in and try the trapdoor, sneak Eddie Finch away."

McLernon grinned at her. "You sure dish out the large orders, Helen Conant!"

"You think we can't do it?"

"We can sure try," he said.

"I'll do *my* part," she told him firmly. "You can trust me to bait Gus out of the way."

He hesitated. Glancing to the wall, he saw a photograph of Jeffrey and Martha McLernon. A lump caught in his throat. His decision had already been made, yet now he had to struggle to make the first step.

Old Chief Conant had known what this would be, had tried to guard against it. McLernon remembered his last strong words in the office when Mike turned in his badge. ". . . . If you walk through that doorway with *that* attitude, you'll

be walking straight to your own doom!"

It was time to walk now, to walk straight and sure, to let nothing stop him. One point helped him make up his mind: this girl was courageously willing to jeopardize her father's career because she had an ideal. She was willing to fight. And her courage stood as a challenge before McLernon. He had an ideal, too, and to achieve it he must put duty ahead of any personal or family affection for his kid brother . . . .

CHAPTER VII

Steel Bullets

AT ten-thirty Mike McLernon drove his car down the graveled driveway to the main entrance of the roadhouse.

"I'll park it myself," he told the attendant, and put the roadster in a place that would be easy to reach and easy to get out of.

He hiked up the wooden steps to the brightly lighted doorway of the Ten Mile House. Helen Conant had come ahead of him, by half an hour.

He stepped into a draped hallway. Music and the rhythmic scrape of dancing feet filled the place with gay sound. Voices chattered, laughed.

He gave his hat to the check-room girl and stepped through an archway to the cocktail bar. The first persons his eyes met were Gus Stoddard and Monk Rafferty. They were standing just inside the arch. He found himself almost at their side.

They gaped at him in amazement. He grinned.

Stoddard said: "This is a funny place for *you* to show up. Maybe you think you're going to get away with taking another poke at me?"

Monk Rafferty, speaking from the side of his mouth, clipped coldly: "Shall I toss him out on his ear, boss?"

Stoddard shook his head, studying McLernon suspiciously. "What do you want around here?"

McLernon shrugged, made a vague gesture toward the bar. "Glass of beer, maybe; listen to the music; general relaxation. Any objections?"

Stoddard's expression was one of a man who sees himself in the position of winning a victory over some one who had been a problem to him. "I see—want to bury the hatchet, huh?"

"Call it that if you like."

Stoddard reached out a hand and tapped Mike's shoulder in an attempt at friendliness. "Okay," he said magnanimously. "I'll show you I'm the kind of guy who can let bygones be bygones. As long as you play ball with me, I'll help cover that brother of yours. Make yourself at home, Mike."

"Thanks," McLernon said.

Stoddard turned to Rafferty. "Go tell the bartenders that anything Mike McLernon wants tonight is on the house." When Rafferty moved away, he went on:

"Sorry I can't have some drinks with you, pal, but I'm busy with a jane tonight—nice little jane. I been trying to set myself in with her for a long time, and tonight she dropped around. So I'll be busy." He nudged Mike's ribs, winked. "You know how it is?"

"I know how it is," Mike responded slowly.

He watched Stoddard swagger across the crowded room, waving at customers, grinning. Over at the far end of the bar, Helen Conant sat waiting for him. He joined her.

Mike McLernon went to the bar, had a beer. Now and then he glanced casually into the mirror behind it. At last Helen Conant looked up, squarely into the mirror, and met his eyes. There was just a slight movement of her head, nothing else.

That was the O.K. signal.

Mike left the bar and pretended to be hunting for the men's room.

He strolled down a long, dimly lit hall. It was deserted. At the very end of it, a door was labeled: *Private.* Helen had told him that this was Stoddard's office. Her signal had meant that now was his chance to enter.

He went in, closed the door quietly behind him. It was a luxuriously appointed office, had soft easy furniture, indirect

lighting. There were no windows. Warmed air entered the room via a modern air-conditioning device.

Mike stepped quickly over the deep-piled rug, bent down. As he drew back the corner of the rug, he saw the crack the trapdoor had around its edges. He slipped his gun from its holster. The fingers of his left hand lifted a small ring, got a grip on it. He raised the trap cautiously.

A flight of steep steps led downward. No sound came from below. A light was burning down there, but in its glow he saw nothing but a concrete floor.

Briskly now, Mike swung to the steps, closed the trap over his head.

"Jeez!" a voice groaned in sudden fear. "Who the hell are you?"

AGAINST one of the basement walls, a thin, scrawny man lay strapped to a cot. McLernon had seen the man before—tied in a closet. The man's eyes got glassy with increased fear.

"I know!" he groaned. "You're gonna do it! Stoddard sent you to do it!"

"Do what?" the ex-dick asked.

"Rub me. Jeez, gimme a break! What did I ever do to you guys? I kept my mouth shut, didn't I? Did you ever catch me squealing? No! I never did nothing to none of you guys!" His thin voice whined, had a choking, pleading sob in it.

Mike McLernon strode to the cot, leveled his finger. "You *are* Eddie Finch, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but—"

Mike went on swiftly: "I'm not one of Stoddard's boys. I heard 'em talking, though. They intend to rub you out before morning."

Mike McLernon wasn't using much of a bluff. Eddie himself had unknowingly given him the idea.

Finch groaned, rolling his watery eyes. "Get me out of here, will you, pal?"

"Maybe," said Mike.

"Maybe? You got to! I'll do anything . . . ."

"Will you talk?"

Under the direct question Eddie Finch squirmed suspiciously. "About what?"

"About the jewelry robbery—about the killing of Dan Barnwell."

Finch blinked, glanced away. "I don't know nothing about it," he growled.

"Nothing?"

He shook his head. "Honest—I don't know a thing. You mean those two guys that busted the store? The guy that shot the cop? No, I don't know a thing."

"Too bad," McLernon told him. "Guess I'll have to leave you here to be rubbed out."

He strode back to the steps, started up.

"Hey!" Eddie Finch called. "Wait!"

Mike stood still, grinning wisely down at him. "Did your memory come back, Eddie?"

"Well, sort of. But first I got to know who you are? Can you really get me out of here?"

"I can get you out in two minutes," McLernon nodded, "but I want a price.

You've got to come to headquarters with me and talk."

"Jeez," Eddie grumbled, "are you from—"

"Yeah," Mike finished. "Want to come with me, or do you want to stay here and be rubbed?"

"I'll come!" Eddie Finch decided explosively. "Get me out of this filthy hole!"

Mike McLernon unstrapped him. Eddie stroked his thin aching arms and legs.

IN Stoddard's empty silent office, the door in the floor rose cautiously. The head of Mike McLernon appeared, his gun. He glanced around briskly, then climbed up.

Eddie Finch scrambled up behind him. They lowered the trap back into position, dropped the corner of the thick rug over it.

Eddie ran over to Stoddard's desk and began to search the drawers.

"Cut that out!" McLernon ordered.

"Listen," Eddie begged, "I just want my rod, see?"

"Forget it," McLernon snapped. "We haven't time."

Eddie Finch still yanked out drawers, scattered their contents. "I might need it, see?"

McLernon stepped over and grabbed his collar. "You *don't* need it. I'll take care of you."

"But I *got* to have it!" Eddie whined. "Honest!"

"What for? To shoot me in the back after I get you out of here?"

"No! I got to have it for another reason. Let me get it, will you?"

McLernon's eyes narrowed in thought. "Okay," he nodded, "get it."

Eddie Finch's trembling hands scurried, groped. He tossed aside old letters, a box of cigars. He took out a gun, threw it on the desk, paying no attention to it, still hunting.

McLernon picked up the revolver which Finch had cast aside. It was nickel-plated, with pearl handles, the one he'd given his brother—the one that put his brother into a murder mixup. He slipped the gun into his pocket, glanced shrewdly at Eddie Finch as the scrawny man took a second revolver from the drawer.

He snatched it from Eddie's hands.

"This yours?"

"Yeah, sure. Give it to me, and let's go."

Mike McLernon's big shoulders grew rigid now. Hard little muscles in his jaw tightened, tensed, as he stared at the revolver in his palm.

"It's a thirty-eight," he announced grimly.

Eddie Finch jittered, moved toward the door to the hall. "Sure—why not? Give it to me. Let's go."

McLernon overlooked the fact that it was advisable to leave in a hurry. A greater fact seemed to be revealed to him.

"It's a thirty-eight," he repeated, half to himself.

Finch blinked nervously. "We better scram."

McLernon wagged his head thoughtfully, stepped over and blocked Finch's path to the door. "I thought you always carried a forty-five?"

"Me? No." Then he faltered, wavered. "Well, sometimes I do—once in a while." He gestured wildly at the door. "Come on, guy; let's scram before Stoddard and his boys bust in."

Calmly, McLernon ignored his frantic suggestion. Calmly he flipped out the revolver's cylinder, pressed the ejector. Six steel-jacketed bullets gleamed in his palm.

"Steel-jackets," he said. Then he reached out and slapped Eddie Finch on the side of the head with the barrel of his own police gun. "You dirty sneaking rat! *You're* the guy that killed Dan Barnwell!"

CHAPTER VIII

DEATH'S STING

OUTSIDE, in the hall, a voice screamed shrilly. It was Helen Conant's voice.

"Look out, Mike! If you're in there, look out! They're coming!"

McLernon knocked Eddie Finch aside,

stepped back and crouched behind the desk, facing the door. He heard a scuffle of feet outside, tense whispering.

Finally, Stoddard called out to him. "Do you like this jane, McLernon?"

When no answer came from the office, Stoddard went on: "I think maybe you do. She gave it away when she sang out just now. We've got an idea to pull on you. It's a swell idea. We're coming in, but she's going in first with a gun at her back. If you want to try some funny stuff, go ahead; Helen Conant gets a dose of dum-dums right in the neck. How about it?"

Mike didn't answer right away. He suspected what had happened. Helen had kept Stoddard away from the office as long as she could. Something had come up; she couldn't swing it any longer.

He tiptoed over to Eddie Finch, said quietly: "You stay still. Otherwise, I'll shoot your teeth out."

Finch flattened himself against the wall. "Lemme have a gun," he pleaded. "Them guys'll get me."

"Stay still, and shut up. As soon as that door opens, you pick up a chair and throw it across the room. When you do that, I won't plug you. You can lift your mitts, and nobody else will plug you."

"Well," Eddie evaded worriedly, "suppose — suppose somebody accidentally shoots, or—"

Mike cut him off with: "Answer *yes* or *no*."

"I'll do it," Eddie Finch sputtered weakly.

Mike McLernon turned and faced the door, and called out: "I had to take a rod away from Finch. I was afraid he might start blasting and you'd hurt Miss Conant. You guys can come in."

With that he sprang toward a tall filing cabinet beside the door, boosted himself up on it, stood erect there, silent, flattened against the wall. He swung his police positive around, pointed it at Eddie Finch.

Outside, Stoddard called: "All right, McLernon, here we come. Hope the jane doesn't get her neck shot off. It's up to you."

The door opened, was flung back wide.

In that tense quick moment, Monk Rafferty appeared. He held Helen Conant in front of him, the snout of an automatic pistol against her back. His quick eyes searched the room for McLernon, searched everywhere swiftly, everywhere but the top of the filing cabinet, which was right at his side.

In that same instant Eddie Finch snatched up a chair and hurled it away from him, distracting Rafferty's attention. And simultaneously, Mike McLernon jumped down from the high cabinet.

His flying weight, crashing against Rafferty, spun the big man around, knocked his gun from his hand.

"Dodge!" Mike yelled at Helen, and he went smashing to the floor with Rafferty, beating the big man's head with his service gun.

Helen acted as spontaneously as he knew she would; she fled to the farthest corner of the office.

Almost at the very second McLernon and Rafferty had gone to the floor together, Stoddard and Fish-eye Davis lunged through the doorway.

"Get him!" Stoddard barked.

Fish-eye snatched up the fallen automatic. Stoddard already had a gun in his hand. Both of them started firing. Bullets carrying the sting of death flew invisibly. At close quarters, with aiming too fast to be accurate, not one of the shots intended to strike Mike McLernon got to its destination.

He knew they wouldn't, not while he kept in swift motion, not after he returned the fire.

Bullets, not meant for Monk Rafferty, spat from Stoddard's badly aimed gun, hammered into the big man's back, made him lurch, jump, squirm under their stinging force.

Almost c a l m l y, Mike McLernon squatted on the floor and exchanged shots with Fish-eye Davis. McLernon was better than Fish-eye. The room drummed with the sound of firing, and Fish-eye doubled up and spilled to the floor.

Stoddard's impatience to kill McLernon had cheated him. All he'd done was

empty his gun and kill Monk Rafferty. The gun clicked in his hand, clicked with futile little sounds, like a cap pistol without caps in it.

"Drop it!" Mike ordered coldly. "It didn't do you any good when it was loaded, and it certainly won't do you any good now."

Stoddard stared wide-eyed at the gun McLernon held pointed at him. He glared frantically at the empty gun in his own hand, as though he thought it had somehow deliberately tricked him.

"Drop it," Mike repeated.

Gus Stoddard dropped it, lifting his limp hands over his head.

Already, Helen Conant was at the telephone on the desk, calling headquarters.

A PAIR of radio cops cleared the hallway. Another pair held the club's customers and employees in the main dining room.

Chief Conant arrived, hurrying down the hall with three detectives from the Bureau. They went into the office.

Rafferty and Davis were sprawled on the floor. Stoddard and Eddie Finch sat on the davenport, side by side, trembling nervously. Mike McLernon and Helen Conant sat on the edge of the desk.

The Old Man took in the whole scene, batted his eyes, rumpled his hair.

"What are *you* doing here, Helen?"

"I'm here because—"

Mike McLernon patted her hand gently. "Better let me tell it."

"Tell what?" the chief grumbled suspiciously. "What *is* this? What's been going on here? Why's my daughter here?"

"We've been working on the Barnwell Case," McLernon explained easily. "It's all finished. The killer wants to turn state's evidence."

"The *what?*" Chief Conant rumpled his hair again.

McLernon said: "My brother didn't shoot Barnwell, chief; we just thought he did. Jeffrey even thought so himself. The whole thing made a mess for a while, but it's all straightened out now. I want to arrest my brother for robbery. Maybe we can get him an easy rap, because the kid's good at heart. He just made a slip. I know he and his wife will both want him to serve his time and come out and live straight."

The chief gaped: "You mean Jeffrey didn't—"

"No," McLernon cut in, "Eddie Finch did the shooting. The first thing that got me thinking was the bullets. I gave Jeffrey the gun, and I gave him a carton of cartridges. I didn't buy steel-jackets. I wouldn't buy steel-jackets, to complete a gift, any more than I'd buy dum-dums."

"Yes, but—"

McLernon smiled. "My brother had never been a crook before, and he'd never shot a gun. His nerves went to pieces when Officer Barnwell caught him with Eddie Finch coming out of the store that night. Finch yelled for Jeff to shoot. Jeff did.

"But Jeff's bullets probably didn't hit anything in the street, not even a telegraph pole. Eddie Finch was the killer, but he bluffed Jeff into thinking differently. Jeff was green at crime and easy to play for a sucker. Eddie said his own gun was a forty-five. Jeff doesn't know one gun from another, so he believed it."

Over on the davenport, Eddie Finch scrubbed at his thin, twitching face. "Sure—I just kidded the punk along. He fell for it. Even when the papers came out and said the cop was killed with steel-jackets, Jeff didn't get wise. He figured a thirty-eight bullet was a thirty-eight bullet; he never knew there was any difference. He fell for the whole gag like a ton of bricks."

McLernon got the .38 revolver, which Eddie Finch had been so anxious to sneak away from Stoddard's office. He handed it to the chief. "There's the rod that killed Barnwell. It's Finch's. A ballistics test will prove it."

"How'd you get it, Mike?"

"Stoddard had it, just as he had Jeff's gun. He bought Jeff's from Finch, then he swiped Eddie's. By holding Eddie's gun—the real murder gun—he figured to keep it out of circulation. He didn't have any reason for turning Eddie in as

a cop-killer. By holding Jeff's gun, he bluffed you into thinking he held the solution to the murder. His bluff worked for a while. He knew you were soft."

"Soft?" Chief Conant snorted.

"Yeah, he knew how you felt about Jeff and me, and that you'd protect all the Stoddard rackets to save us from murder trouble. He held off trying to pull the bluff on me, because I might go ahead and learn the truth; that it was just a frame on my brother, and on you.

"He was pretty worried about Finch. Eddie uses dope, and he might crack sometime and spill the truth and spoil Stoddard's racket protection. Finally, he decided to make Eddie a prisoner, maybe bump him. But Helen steered me . . . ."

"Yeah!" Chief Conant snapped authoritatively. "Now we're getting down to what I want to know. How's my daughter mixed up in this? You never met her before. What's she been doing around here?"

McLernon smiled tauntingly at his ex-boss. "She's been helping me prove that you've been a crooked law officer!"

"What's that you said?"

Mike McLernon kept smiling, took Helen's arm and led her to the hall. "That's the *awful truth*," he goaded. "She'll tell you about it sometime, chief. You've got a nice daughter. I'm going to take her home now. I'm sure surprised a swell girl like Helen is could have such a sneaking old crook for a father. Imagine it, Helen? Your old man covered Stoddard just to get bribe money. He violated his oath of office, turned crook, and all *for money*."

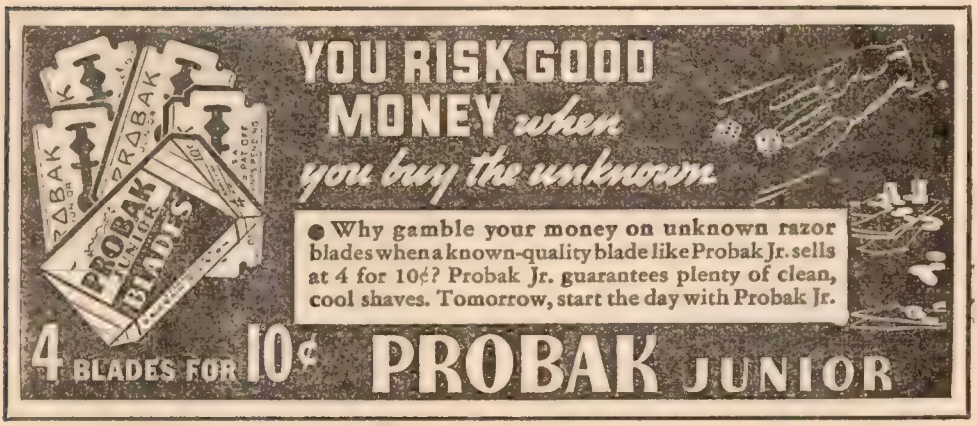
"Stop teasing him, Mike," she requested pleasantly.

The chief knew he was being kidded. He enjoyed it. A great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He was free now—free to conduct his department as he wanted.

"Listen, Mike," he said, trying to get a sour growl in his tone, "if you don't stop throwing mud at the name of your superior officer, I'll—I'll take your badge away."

"You poor prune," Mike grinned, "don't you remember? You took it away two days ago."

The chief ran his pudgy hands through his hair. "By gosh, I forgot. Well I guess I'll have to give it back to you again. I guess it's the only way I can stop you from calling me a crooked cop!"



Emperor Blackmail

By Steve Fisher

"Red-eyes" Mark Turner, Honolulu detective captain, thought he was hard-boiled enough to blast a lovely young girl's faith in life—just to convict his man.

MARK TURNER could see that the wild-eyed kid in front of him was a resident of the islands. And he judged by the immaculate quality of her white silk dress that she was probably worth money.

Her greenish eyes were wide. She was damned frightened—anyone could see that. She had bitten her lips until they were creased and red from blood marks.

"I tell you that you must do something!" she pleaded. "It isn't right. Warren has been the confidential secretary to my father, and now he is being held by Su Low. They intend to murder him. I *know* they do!"

Mark Turner, captain of Honolulu detectives, was a huge, well-built figure. He had bright red hair and a crisp red Vandyke beard. The contrast of this coloring, along with the protruding high cheekbones in his face, made his somber eyes as red as glowing coals.

"I can't understand what you are so excited about," Turner drawled. "Your father doesn't seem to want to make any charges."

"But father thinks that Warren was implicated in something concerning Su Low. Warren wasn't. It is all very absurd." Her words were suddenly chopped short. She leaned on the desk, and her long hair caressed her lovely slim shoulders. "How do *you* know who my father is?"

They were on Turner before he could see them.

Mark Turner grinned. He pulled a case of cigarettes from his drawer, put one

of the smokes in his mouth and lit up. "Easy," he replied. "You're young enough to be a deb, but you aren't a visitor from the mainland. You've been here in Hawaii for a while. I am assuming that you are important because you are well dressed and rather demanding in what you want. If you were a resident of Honolulu society I should know you. Since I *don't* know you, you must live on the island of Maui with your pineapple-plantation-owning father."

"You're right," she snapped; "but if you think this turning Sherlock on me is doing any good, you've got another guess coming. I'm not sane-minded enough to appreciate such a feat of mental deducing. What I want you to do is—"

"—Rescue your boy friend."

Her small ears became crimson, her green eyes hard. "He *is not* that. He was just an employee of my father, and I am too much of a human being to see any innocent person ruthlessly killed."

Mark Turner stroked his Vandyke. He glanced down at the rather clumsy dragon's-head ring the girl wore on her middle finger.

"I suppose that you're wearing his ring just for good luck?"

She stared hard and long. Her lower lip quivered a little, and then she broke down. "All right!" She glanced about, saw a chair and seated herself in it. "I'm in love with him. So what? I tell you he's straight. A clean, honest boy—"

Turner laughed cruelly. "He's one of the rottenest rats in Honolulu."

She was up again, her small fists tight. "He *isn't* that! Oh, I know the story. You know it too. He was left in China as a baby and brought up under Su Low's care. But he's a white man, remember that, even though his whole life was spent learning the Oriental customs and believing the Oriental beliefs. He was made to be a white Chinese, so to speak. He was educated so that Su Low could use him later in concocting his shady schemes; so he could be used as a wedge to get blackmail letters from rich people. So he could get society women to gamble in the Chinese casinos—"

TURNER put out his cigarette. The girl was serious. The detective knew Warren all right. He was a white "Wu" in the line-up as far as the police were concerned. Although Warren was a square-shouldered young man with vivid black hair and snapping dark eyes, Turner had always considered him as a white rat, because Su Low used him as just that. But the girl was in deadly earnest. She wanted action. Turner wasn't one to spurn a girl's tearful plea; and besides, he had been wanting a legitimate excuse to clamp down on Su Low for a long time.

"I know all about his past," the girl went on hysterically, "but can't you see that it is all due to his raising? He was made to learn everything Chinese. He was hardly conscious of the fact that he was of white heritage. Then he came to work for father, edged into that job. At first he gave Su Low the information he wanted to blackmail father, and then as Warren and I became friends, he ceased doing this."

Turner got up and strapped on his automatic. His reddish eyes were still on the girl, who looked very small in the large chair, talking for all she was worth:

"So I forgave him. I love him, that's why I did it. Don't you think that a man like Warren could change himself completely for love? Don't you think—"

"*If* he were in love," Turner said dryly.

"But he *is* in love! Don't you think that *I* know?"

"I hope you do. Your father's name is Lowell. What do they call you around home?"

"Ellen."

"All right, Ellen. Is the story like this? Warren worked for you, fell in love and refused to give Su Low further information. Su Low captured him and took him back to the lairs they have and is intending either to win him back to his will or kill him?"

Ellen nodded her pretty head vigorously. She got out of her chair, her eyes full of admiration. "Gee," she breathed,

"in spite of what I said about that Sherlock stuff, I've got to hand it to you. You know what you're doing, all right."

Turner gripped her hand. "Go on back to your island plantation. I'll see what I can do."

"Go back?" Ellen laughed nervously. Turner couldn't help thinking that she looked like a poppy when her cheeks reddened as they did now. "I'm never going back! Never, see? I'm through with all that. *I'm* changed too. I used to be a little hell-cat around the place. A tomboy who rode horses, acted half savage, and took life as it came. Dad didn't think I'd ever fall in love. And now he—"

"—Is sore because you love Warren, and he thinks Warren is a crook. And he's griped, too, because you are in love at all. So you up and pulled out, and you've probably got a room at the Morris Hotel where he'll find you just as soon as he wants you."

Ellen's greenish eyes were wide with amazement.

Captain Mark Turner rubbed his red beard and grinned knowingly. "You're an all-right kid," he told her. "I admire your grit. You seem to know what you want and make no bones about getting it. I suppose you even want to accompany me down to Su Low's dens—"

"Will you?"

"No. That's out." His voice had a harsh ring of finality. "But don't go back to that Morris Hotel."

He thought a moment. He knew he was a damn fool to let himself become so sentimentally concerned about a crazy girl who had fallen in love with a questionable young man. But hell! A guy couldn't help getting worked up over Ellen's sincerity. Besides that, it was a hot night, and the detective captain's trigger finger felt just a bit itchy.

"No, don't return to the hotel," he repeated. "I don't advise that." He pulled out a card. "Here, take this to the Mama Sans on Beretania and tell her 'Red Eyes' sent you. She'll give you the whole place if you want it. You'll be safe there until I get in touch with you."

There was a mist over Ellen's lovely eyes. "I don't know how to thank you," she said huskily.

Turner bit his lip. "Then don't thank me," he replied. He edged her toward the door, because he could see that she was going to begin crying pretty quickly, and he certainly didn't want that.

CHINATOWN looked eerie. Mark Turner's sure and even steps slapped along the sidewalk ominously. His quiet breathing lent an extra hush to the night. The street was medium-sized. Most of the Korean barber shops were still open, and the slim, slant-eyed females, who were artists at trimming beards—such as his red one—were leaning sleepily against the door-jambs. There were Chinese inscriptions on a lot of windows, but most of the light and noise came from upstairs joints. From those upper windows, gay little banners waved, with crazy black Chinese marks on them; and music that sounded like it was ground from a broken-down hurdy-gurdy shrilled out into the night air.

Su Low controlled a lot of territory, and Turner knew it. He had always wanted to crack down on him, but the rest of the department had disliked the idea. The times when they *had* dragged the astute Oriental in, they had been made laughing matters of in the two daily papers. To venture alone into Su Low's quarters meant perhaps a bullet in the heart, a knife in the side, or a slim silk rope about his thick neck. Any pleasant little thing could be expected, from the death of a thousand tortures to the bleeding of his ears until he'd burst from the pain.

That was why he was crazy. He had allowed his secret brooding to "get" Su Low, and the girl's urgent requests, to swing him into a move that was practically certain to be disastrous. And yet, this way of attacking was the only way he would be liable to stumble upon evidence concrete enough to put the yellow master of Honolulu's evil away for a while.

But "Red Eyes" Turner was that way. As silly as a lunatic at times, but thus far he had managed to keep all of his

ribs and both of his arms and both of his legs. So he was lucky. Perhaps he would be lucky again.

He swung down a dark and musty back alley. Pantry boys were emptying stale chop suey into garbage cans. A black cat skirted his path. Thunder clapped in the sky, but summer thunder in Honolulu, and summer rain, meant nothing.

He turned suddenly and went up to the rear entrance of the Morris Hotel. Opening the screen door, he stepped inside. There was a hallway that lead on into the hotel. To his right there was a portal to a "closet." Turner knew that it wasn't a closet at all. It was a room into which one went, to get down into the exotic gambling rooms of the wary Su Low.

Jerking out his automatic, he stepped to the door and tried it. An eye-panel slid back. Immediately a voice rasped:

"Red Eyes!"

As if it had been a signal, Turner crashed forward with his bulky weight. The lock splintered. The detective arrived inside in time to see a trapdoor, which led below, close. He jerked it back open and descended the steps quickly.

He jammed his gun into the back of a Chinaman. Another portal slid open. Turner smashed his way inside. He stared then, all but transfixed at the scene before him.

It was a room of golden radiance. A rich yellow rug was on the floor. Tapestries adorned every wall. Black and red furniture in the lowest, most modernistic design was about, and in the center there were large gambling tables. Casino, roulette, dice blocks.

Well-dressed men and women were standing about. Crooks, all of them. The kind of crooks that Turner couldn't touch. Sneaking into low Chinese dives to have their money taken away from them; disobeying the law so they could get robbed.

For a moment Turner stood swaying on the flat of his feet. His red eyes were burning balls of hatred. The heavy automatic wavered in his right hand. The veins stood out on his forehead.

"Out," he rasped. "All of you get out."

The snooty society-club people bolted for the exits. Turner swept by them and went into the next room. This one was the same as the first. Turner kept on. He came into a small room in which only men were allowed. There were expensive couches on which rich customers slept, doped with damnable poppy fumes.

But Turner had known that he would see all this, and he cared little about it. There was no evidence in it—not enough that could be proved afterward. Hell, hadn't he dragged testimony out of people to prove that *real* opium was used, and that the gambling *was* for keeps, only to have babbling lawyers twist his statements and infer that he had a personal grudge against Su Low? They had said that these dives were but "quaint places with Chinese atmosphere" for the tourists, and that in spite of appearances, nothing was genuine.

Suddenly Turner saw a blade flash across the room. He twisted, and his automatic roared. Simultaneous with the shot came a shrill gong that pierced through each room.

A crowd of Chinamen rushed at Turner and were on him before he could see half of them.

The next thing he knew, the automatic was out of his hand and he was being dragged. He kept telling himself that he was going to get out of everything, and he was going to get this kid Warren out too, if there *was* anything straight about him. Ellen had been so sincere that she had convinced him that there was. And if he could get hold of something valuable in Su Low's office, where he would be taken, he'd clamp the lid on this thing in spite of the big money and "names" that kept it protected.

HE was released in Su Low's office. The walls of this were done entirely in black; the rug was of the same color. Everything was black, in fact, except the grinning little Chinaman sitting behind the ebony desk, his stained yellow teeth gleaming in the light from the lamp.

"Honorable detective come to pay humble Su Low one more visit?"

"Quit the kidding," Turner barked. "I came down to get you to release Warren. I know he turned traitor on you. You had it coming to you."

It was all bluff, but everybody was a *little* afraid of the law, at least.

So Low's grin vanished. His tight yellow face became an evil mask. "Honorable detective puts his nose in too far. You are through, Mark Turner. In China that means—"

"We are in Honolulu, and I am the law!"

"*This* is my China," Su Low squeaked. "Everything your red eyes glance upon here is mine." He chuckled. "You can be killed, your body buried in quick lime, your bones put in a River Street cess flood, and all will be forgotten."

"That's just your version of it, Su Low. But you're crazy as hell, see? You can't kill me. You haven't the guts. You're not as good as you think you are. Warren turned rat on you, didn't he? If that kid wasn't afraid of you, do you think that *I* am?"

"White fool speaks too hastily," Su Low said in anger. He rose to his feet. Turner could see in the shadows behind that he was covered by the guns of Chinese henchmen. "Su Low is all that he says he is. By the power of my most honorable and almighty ancestors, Mr. Red Eyes, you shall die tonight!"

"Warren crossed you," Turner gritted. He was losing his bluff and there'd have to be a helluva fight pretty quickly. He knew that. "If he can beat you, so can I!"

"Crawling reptile! Simpering snake!" Su Low hissed. He jerked open a drawer and waved some papers in front of Turner's face. "A signed statement in full about Warren's love affair with Miss Ellen Lowell. Letters from her contained here, too. A complete blackmail plan. It is all here. Call that a double-cross, honorable moron?"

"Lie, you dog!" Turner shot back, getting his teeth into the thing. He had awakened Su Low's anger which was a rare and hard thing to do. He had to follow it up now, just as a prizefighter follows up with a second good blow after the first. "Lie like the stinking, stupid, withered old man that you are! Those papers—"

Su Low laid them out on the desk. Turner stared down. The Chinaman had been telling the truth all right. Warren had used the girl's love for a blackmail plot! And she had been so sure of his love and his willingness to do the right thing.

Turner lost control of himself in that moment. That was why he was possessed of a greater strength than he had ever known before. He was suddenly a ruthless, bitter and maddened savage, crazed for this devil's blood!

He snatched up the papers and a knife, which lay on the desk as an ornament. Bullets roared out from the partly hidden guns behind Su Low. Turner grabbed the little Chinaman and held him in front of him.

Su Low was fighting like a demon but just one of Turner's mighty arms was enough to hold him.

"Shoot some more, you fools, and you'll shoot Su Low!"

There were no more shots. Su Low struggled desperately, but he was no match for the detective captain. With his red eyes afire, and his flaming Vandyke looking more satanic than ever, Turner demanded:

"Bring in Warren!"

There was hesitation. Turner stayed his ground. He had his back to a solid wall and he was still holding Su Low in front of him. Su Low gave a moaning command in Chinese.

Presently a thin young man came into the room.

Turner wasted no time. His hard eyes surveyed the lad. He saw the grim lines about the mouth; the deceiving eyes that had intrigued an innocent girl.

"Shoot him down!" Turner barked, holding the knife at the back of Su Low's neck. "Shoot him through the head or I'll kill Su Low!"

The slim youth began trembling. Sweat beaded over his high forehead. His eyes got shifty. He made a bolt for the door. Two Chinamen grabbed him.

Turner whispered quickly into Su Low's ear. "Want me to kill you here, dog? If you think I won't do it, you're guessing wrong as hell."

Su Low gave the order to kill Warren without hesitation. The action had completely unnerved the old man's Oriental stoicism.

"Let me live!" Warren screeched in a high voice. "Let me live!" He was slobbering now. His eyes were bulging out. His face was strained and white.

Suddenly he fell to his knees. He was pleading, gibbering, laughing and crying.

"Shoot him," Mark Turner said evenly.

There was a shot. Blood spurted from Warren's forehead. His face ghastly, he pitched forward.

"All right, Su Low," Turner said, "you and I are getting out of this place, and if there's any funny stuff there'll be a heap of Chinese bones in one corner and a lot of blood and brains against the wall!"

"BUT you *can't* do it!" the District Attorney roared madly. "Do you realize the names you will have to involve? Do you know how much money there is behind this? I tell you, we've got to release Su Low on bond right now!"

"I've listened to you too damned long," Mark Turner said acidly, extracting a cigarette from his case and tapping it on his mahogany desk. "As Su Low told me, I'm through. Through listening to you and a lot of other people around here, see? I'm keeping Su Low behind bars. Got the governor's okay on it, and if you don't like it, you can—"

"But the case will be absurd in court, just like the last one. You have no proof for your statements. And if this turns out to be a foul ball too, you're *through* all right!"

Turner's red eyes had a peculiar gleam in them. "So my reputation is at stake, is it? Well, so what, you big baboon? I have the evidence I need this time. I don't have to have you to tell me that it has to be good evidence. And I don't want to listen to your jabbering that the papers are riding me and calling me crazy. Su Low stays in jail until this court trial opens!"

The D.A. shrugged. "I'm sure they'll run you the hell out of town on a rail!" He jammed on his hat and left the office.

Turner sat gazing at his burning cigarette. As the smoke swirled upward he realized that he was a stubborn fool, trying to go against politics for the right of law. But he had the goods now. He had risked his life to get the goods last night, and hell, he'd use every shred of evidence—

The door of the office opened. Turner's heart sank. This was something he had not considered. Ellen Lowell walked in. Her face was white, chalk-white. Her soft hair was still down about her shoulders. She wore black—a lovely mourner, she was.

"They killed him before you could help him, didn't they?" she asked in a strained voice, coming over to the desk.

Turner ducked out his cigarette. He got up and came around the desk. He took Ellen's hand; it was very soft. He tried to speak to her but found he couldn't. His mouth was hot and dry. He stared down at her sweet beauty. Of course, she didn't know about that double-cross. It was Turner's ace in the hole for the trial. He was keeping mum about it.

He didn't want to say what he had done. But he couldn't help it, talking to the girl like this. She was a "right" kid all right, and there wasn't any getting around that.

She looked up at him, her babyish face soft, tender. "But Warren died thinking of me, I hope," she managed. "He was like that. I'll bet he died bravely and proudly. Stood right up and took his medicine."

There was an ugly picture in Turner's mind. It was that of a slobbering idiot down on his knees, gibbering for his life.

"After we discovered our love," Ellen went on in a trembling voice, "he changed so much. He was so straight and staunch and loyal. I shall always adore that in him. How wonderful he was—"

A tear trickled across her cheek.

The hard detective with the red Vandyke turned away. He glanced toward the window. His voice was hollow and dry. "Yeah, you're right, kid. Warren stood up, and when they burned him down he said—"

"Yes?" Her voice was pitifully eager.

It was no use. Turner couldn't let her know. "He told them to tell you that he loved you, Ellen, dear—even in death!"

She breathed deeply. A radiance flushed from her cheeks. She went to the window, and then turned about. Her lips were firm, her green eyes steady.

"This," she said, "is the one thing in my life that means something. I'll go back now and be a tomboy and a savage again. No more love for me." Her eyes softened. "So he said that even in death—" She burst into tears. Choking back sobs, she concluded: "He was so wonderful! So *darned* grand!" She ran from the room.

MARK TURNER sat down a moment. He was too dazed to think coherently. Evidence! Newspapers laughing! Running out of town! Railed out! Fruitless years of detective work in Honolulu all powdered to hell now for a statement a dying coward didn't make!

He got up and went to the window again. His red eyes stared out into the street. Was it worth it all? Was her love and life worth more than his reputation, his job? Of course it wasn't. She was just a kid and she had a lot of life before her. The romance was her own fault; she should have listened to her father. Turner would send the evidence in, the papers that would reveal the truth about Warren to her. Sure, he would, because he wasn't a sucker to women. Not Mark Turner. Some other soft-hearted guy, maybe, but not the famous "Red Eyes" of Honolulu!

He shrugged indifferently and lit a cigarette. He was still at the window watching. What a sap he would be not to turn in the evidence! To keep it in his safe where it now was. Or to burn it up. Hell, he couldn't convict Su Low without it, and he knew he couldn't. And without it now, he couldn't remain in Honolulu as a detective captain and face the music.

Suddenly his eyes hardened. He saw the slim figure of the girl as she left the police station and climbed into the waiting automobile. Her father, a white-haired old man, was holding the door open for her. She looked very sweet and pure there in the sun.

Mark Turner threw down his cigarette and stepped on it. He crossed the room and brought out the papers he had taken from Su Low's place. Quickly, with shaking hands, he struck a match.

The ashes floated to the floor. The man with the red Vandyke and the burning eyes of a living Satan laughed hoarsely. His diabolic laughter echoed from the walls and shrieked back into his ears.

Those ashes on the floor were his ashes. He was through. All done, because his heart, which had escaped so many bullets, wasn't as hard as he thought it was.

His hands numb he picked up the phone and got the outside desk.

"Hello, sarge? Book me on the *Mahona* sailing tonight for the mainland. And tell the D.A. I was just kidding about last night. I was drunk. He can release Su Low and let him go his own stinking way."

Turner was just about to hang up when the voice of the sergeant poured excitedly over the wire to him.

"*What?*" he gasped.

"Yeah, that's right," the sergeant told him. "Su Low knew that you had the goods on him this time, and you know these Orientals—he committed suicide in his cell."

When Mark Turner was at last able to speak, he said weakly, with his voice trembling:

"Cancel those mainland reservations and get a plane to take me to Maui. I guess I'll—I'll get a little rest playing tomboy with a girl named Ellen."

Last Chance Acre

By Maitland Scott

Officer Mike "Mother" Callahan wanted to prove to the scoffers at headquarters that a family man's knowledge can sometimes trap killers.

NAN STEWART clutched a tiny, whimpering bundle of human life to her quivering bosom. She faltered clumsily on her thin legs, which her threadbare nightgown revealed had lost their roundness of feminine charm, while her heart beat an overtime tempo to the jarring thunders that a murder god's death instruments blasted through the air.

Momentarily, she cared not whether she and her baby died that night, the next day, or the next—or how—because money to buy food was hard to earn. But the primitive instinct to woo life soon returned to her, and she thought

she would scream if those hideous gunshots did not stop. For hell had come to Last Chance Acre.

The Masked Raiders, unidentified killers, had been routed upon their exit from a near-by warehouse, through a shrewd stake-out executed by G-men. The gang had dropped their precious burdens of looted furs, and—cut off from getaway cars—had gained the shelter of Last Chance Acre, a dreary group of tenement buildings on an edge of the city's swampland.

Widowed Nan Stewart stumbled to the edge of her shabby bed in a top-floor room of the Acre. Numbly, she wondered if she should try and take her baby out of the house. But the sound of the battle, waged between an hundred-odd lawmen and the Masked Raiders, was too frightening; so she huddled on the bed and tried to quiet the petulant whimperings of the infant in her arms.

The sound of a running gunfight came from the roof immediately overhead—pounding feet, staccato pistol and Tommy-gun shots; an occasional groan, the thud of a falling body. An ever-tightening cordon of surrounding police was evident below—the sporadic *rat-tat-tat* of machine guns, dependent upon the sighting of a masked figure scooting over one or another of the roofs covering the tenements of Last Chance Acre. And from time to time a searchlight's brilliant beam put to shame the cheap, fly-specked bulb in the ceiling of the young mother's room, as it made a traversing course of that particular house.

Directed by a few young and alert G-men, more than a hundred plain-clothes men and harness bulls spread a tight cordon around Last Chance Acre, and prepared to search every inch of those grimy tenement houses for the human rats that had sought refuge there. For now no more of the gang could be found upon the roofs. It was truly a Last Chance Acre for the remainder of the Raiders, whose members had killed so ruthlessly in their thieving—and for Nan Stewart, who could not find work enough to keep her baby and herself properly alive.

Footsteps sounded outside the young mother's door a few moments after the sounds of gunfire had died away, but she scarcely paid them heed. Just another alarmed tenant moving about in the hall, she thought. Then several knocks came on the door, and a hoarse voice gruffed:

"It's the law. Open up. Everybody outta here—quick!"

Nan threw a worn coat over her thin, girlish shoulders, wrapped the baby in a blanket, hurried to the door, and opened it. Then she staggered back into the room, a scream rising to her throat. But steel-like fingers fastened about her windpipe, stopped her outcry from rising farther.

One of the Masked Raiders, heavy automatic in right hand, pushed Nan back into the room with his grip upon her throat. Holding her baby more tightly, she felt waves of cold fear rise from her stomach.

The man was panting raspingly from the exertion of fighting and escaping the law. She could see the glitter of desperation, of fierce savageness, in his eyes showing through the sighting slits in a hoodlike mask that cowled his head; she could smell the reek of sweat from his body, of exploded cordite from his automatic.

The masked man darted a quick look around the single room, slowly released his grip upon her throat.

"Not a word out of you, sister," he clipped, and waggled the gun significantly.

Nan Stewart retreated slowly backward to the bed, clutching her child protectingly to her breast as she whispered fearfully, shakily:

"Please, you won't—"

"Shut up," the gangster cut in, voice low. "I'd as soon let you have it or not—the way I'm fixed. . . . So, your name's Stewart, eh? Where's your old man?"

For a moment Nan Stewart was stunned at hearing her name spoken by the gunman. Then, when she realized that he had learned it from the penciled name-card on the door, she answered with an effort:

"He—he's dead. . . ."

The masked man came farther into the room and poked suspiciously into a rickety closet, gun ready, before he said:

"He'd better be like you tell me, or the kid gets blasted." He jerked off the mask and stuffed it into a hip pocket. "I gotta get an idea—an' if you don't keep your nose clean, all round, sister, that brat gets it first. That's a promise!"

The young girl-mother's soft-brown eyes looked piteously into the hard, pale-blue ones of the gunman as words trembled from her lips:

"I—I'm telling the truth. I'll do anything you say; only don't hurt my—my baby."

A police searchlight flashed its prying shaft into the dimly lit room, and the gangster shrank back to the wall nearest him. Then clumping feet sounded dimly. five stories below. How was he to remain there, undetected, until that cordon of watchful hounds of justice was removed? He knew that a fine-combed search had begun in every house of Last Chance Acre.

For a moment, Rudy Heimer, leader of the Masked Raiders, got panicky. Then a steadying gleam came in those pale-blue eyes of his. Galvanized into action, he made swift, deliberate preparations to save his very life. His movements were executed with the grim care of a man who knew that the slightest slip would mean for him the sear of the electric chair. His terse, careful instructions to Nan Stewart were uncompromising in the quick penalty he would deal out should she fail in the slightest degree.

TRAFFIC OFFICER MIKE CALAHAN'S police positive was ugly, dangerous in his right hand as he pounded his other fist on Nan Stewart's door. Calahan's face was ugly, too, but it was not dangerous in expression; it was wreathed in a prepared smile of friendliness. For Mike Calahan felt embarrassed at disturbing honest folk, especially families. His proudest and happiest boast was that of family man.

"Open up, please, Mrs. Stewart!" he bawled pleasantly, reading her name from the soiled name-card. "It's the police; so don't be afraid. We've got to search the whole house."

There was the sound of footsteps, and Rudy Heimer, coat off and vest comfortably unbuttoned, holding the baby in the crotch of his left arm, opened the door.

Heimer's voice was gruff, annoyed, as he essayed to say with annoyed convincingness: "Everything's okay here, officer. My wife ain't well, and all this here shooting has upset her enough."

At this point a harness-bull sergeant stopped at the door. He grinned at sight of Calahan, and said:

"Okay, Family Man, don't miss a rat hole. There's five thousand fish in rewards for that masked rat guy."

Calahan closed the door, sized up the room with quick, sympathetic understanding. It was a typical tenement hovel of Last Chance Acre: large brass bedstead, wash-bowl in a corner, with flimsy gas range beside it, rickety board closet —no bath room. Then his glance took in Heimer, sympathetically, because of the wan girl in the bed.

But Calahan, being a "family man," pondered a bit at the clumsiness of the way that Heimer was holding the blanket-wrapped baby.

"Don't go outside your rights in casing the rooms in this house," he remembered the sergeant's instructions. Of course, being a family man, these instructions were not necessary where there was a mother and child.

"Sorry, folks," he said, ducking his head at Nan Stawart. "I'll have to look in the clothes closet. I've got to search this place—just as a matter of routine. This here Masked Raiders gang that's been makin' all the ruckus, is due for the chair. The leader's worth five grand, too, you know."

Heimer said: "Okay, officer, but please hurry. We've had enough trouble already, keeping the kid from being scared at all the noise.

The baby was still whimpering fretfully, and Officer Calahan cooed inanely at the infant before going to the closet.

An almost imperceptible tightening came at the corners of Nan Stewart's eyes when the mention of a five-thousand-dollar reward was made. Everything was so hopeless, so hopeless—and the sound of the words, "five-grand," hinted so much happiness and chance for her baby and herself . . . .

But how could she tell this cop what was hidden before his very eyes, without endangering the life of her baby? How could she let him know, unknown to the gunman, so that the police could safely capture the killer with the hard, pale-blue eyes? There was her baby's life—and the heavy automatic in the right-hand pocket of Heimer's trousers . . . .

MIKE CALAHAN turned from the empty closet, again eyed the way Heimer was carrying the baby, and said to Nan Stewart: "Well, good-night, ma'm. Sorry to disturb you folks. Guess you're havin' a hard enough time without all this stuff goin' on. I—"

Heimer interrupted: "Sure, sure, officer—that's all right. I gotta get this little son of mine to sleep now."

The muscles in Nan Stewart's thin body tightened at Rudy Heimer's words as the officer started toward the door. Through her mind there pounded the thoughts of:

"Five thousand dollars . . . . her baby . . . . a chance for them both . . . ."

When Calahan turned at the door and again ducked his head at her in a self-conscious bow, she said:

"Yes, officer—we're so worried, and all the shooting has got on our nerves. The baby, and everything—we're so poor . . . . Even the clothes for my son—the baby, he only has those knitted pink things left to wear from better times; they're too small for him now, too. Oh, we— Well, I shouldn't talk to you about our troubles."

Mike Calahan's big frame tensed under his dark-blue uniform, and he dropped his hand from the doorknob and moved slowly back into the room. Again his eyes surveyed the scene—a typical poor couple in Last Chance Acre, with the shirt-sleeved husband trying to quiet an under-nourished baby while an over-worried mother tried to rest. Even the man's coat, hanging over the back of a scarred chair seemed to be in place.

"Sure, sure, ma'm, I understand," said Officer Calahan in a deep, kindly voice. "Even if I say it for myself, I'm a family man, too, y'know; an' I'm sure wishin' you an' the little son a lotta better luck."

Mike Calahan's greatest ambition was to be a real lawman; detect, do something in the line of out-and-out crime subduction. But Calahan's forte had seemed to lie only in a specialized sense of vehicular orderliness, which had kept him waving at traffic for many a long year. And many were the good-natured but secretly soul-hurting gibes of his fellow officers assigned to non-traffic tours.

"Good old Mike—he wants to work up to plainclothes man. Mike—why, he's the family man. Round up a crook? Ha, ha—he's a family man; he couldn't even catch a cold."

Mike Calahan's homely face hid his thoughts: "Family man I am—sure. But maybe a family man can be a helluva lot smarter than them fellas think—smarter than them, too."

The kindly traffic cop said to Heimer: "Well, mister, I'll be wishin' you folks a lotta luck." But he was really stalling, again taking in the details of the room—cracked walls and ceiling, dirty floor, lack of chairs, a cheap, garish table lamp, from which the bulb was gone . . . .

In few, quick seconds, Mike Calahan was wondering if he should take a chance. It would cost him plenty if he blundered. But Calahan was a family man, and that was the code by which he lived.

"Well, folks," he said, "I'll be goin', just as soon as I say good-bye to the little one."

Officer Calahan commenced to gamble his career on the force by grinning and stuffing his police positive into a side pocket for his ample greatcoat, to allay any possible suspicion. Calmly, swiftly, he took the baby from Heimer. Then, holding the mewling infant with practiced ease, he walked, smiling affably, over to

the bed where Nan Stewart lay. There he put the child down beside her.

"Mr. Stewart," he said with supreme satisfaction, "I see you don't know how to hold a baby very well . . . . Well, after you've had your seventh, like I've had, you'll know how to handle the little rascals a bit better."

For a moment Traffic Officer Calahan hesitated. He knew he was taking a chance to act the way he was planning. Then the galling salutations of his comrades on the force came back to him:

"'Mother' Calahan, howya? Still trying fer Homicide, ol' family man who couldn't even catch a cold? How's the Sherlock Holmes business comin'?"

All that was enough reminder. Mike Calahan acted, quickly swiftly, now that the baby was out of Heimer's reach.

RUDY HEIMER was a second quicker, however. Suddenly suspicious, he yanked the heavy automatic out of his trouser's pocket, swung the muzzle toward the bluecoat's midriff. Calahan leaped, got a grip on Heimer's gun-wrist. The two locked in a desperate death struggle.

Mike Calahan struggled silently, intent upon making no sound; for he wanted the full credit of getting his man single-handed. Heimer tried to make no noise for the simple reason that he knew the house was full of cops. Even so, the homely traffic officer managed to grin assuringly at Nan Stewart, who, heart pounding, was too excited to more than stammer out:

"Yes—yes, he's one of them."

Calahan pulled downward, suddenly, forcefully, and at the same time, shot a clutching grab at Heimer's left wrist. The action threw the Masked Raider's pistol muzzle so much out of line that the traffic cop thought he would have a chance.

Mike Calahan did his best, but his honest heart sank when he found that the wiry muscles of Heimer were too much for him. The right wrist of the gunman, wiry and inexorable, was slowly, surely turning that lethal pistol muzzle straight at his face. Heimer was too strong, and in sheer desperation, Calahan tripped a stocky leg of the pale-eyed man.

Traffic cop and Masked Raiders' chieftain fell to the floor with a dull thud. The rickety table wobbled, and the lamp it bore fell soundlessly upon Calahan's back and rolled to the floor near him. The two men wrestled and twisted desperately. Then they were again deadlocked for the moment, but that sinewy wrist of Heimer's was relentlessly twisting the muzzle of the automatic to aim directly at Calahan's forehead.

Family Man Calahan held on desperately, and was suddenly aware of the empty socket of the useless reading lamp. It was hard and awkward under his left forearm. Mike Calahan thought thoroughly, but rapidly, before he expended his last bit of energy in a wild chance.

The fingers of the traffic cop tightened cruelly upon the tendons in Heimer's wrist, and the pain of the pressure made the gangster's fingers unclench, shoot out straight. Then Calahan shoved those extended fingers violently under the edge of his left forearm.

Nan Stewart's breath caught in her throat, as, half fainting, she watched the desperate struggle. Suddenly the bodies of both men stiffened, and they both grunted with hoarse, strangled sobs. Heimer's gun fired a shot before it dropped from his paralyzed fingers. And then Calahan had scooped the weapon up from the floor.

The homely traffic cop had the upper hand now, and he made Heimer get up from the floor. "Mother" Calahan had done a lot of careful thinking in those brief seconds when he had been deadlocked with sure death. He had gambled perilously—and won.

Kindly Calahan, the traffic cop who wanted most of all to make the homicide squad, had played a fifty-fifty chance against the Grim Reaper. He knew that when a light bulb burns out, a person pushes the switch button on and off repeatedly to make sure that the filament is burned through, then removes and throws away the bulb—and sometimes

leaves the current to the socket *turned on*. That was the one, slim chance upon which Mike Calahan had acted.

When Officer Calahan had shoved Heimer's extended fingers violently under the edge of his left forearm, toward the gaping mouth of the empty socket, he had succeeded in getting a finger of the gunman inside the socket. Both men had been shocked. But Calahan, with prepared will-power, had captured the dropped automatic before his adversary could recover.

Racing footsteps were now pounding toward the door—the result of the shot fired from the pistol. Calahan dragged his gun-covered captive across the room. Then he had the door open, and men crowded into the room.

THE leader of those men of the law was in civilian clothes; young, alert, taking unbelievably short time to size up the situation—a G-man.

"Good work, officer," he said. "That's Rudy Heimer, head of the Masked Raiders. One of his pals we've been sweating down in the basement just described him."

Nan Stewart pushed herself feebly up in bed, started to speak, but only moaned feebly.

Mike Calahan, feeling a delightful, warm glow of pride suffuse his chest, said: "Now—take it easy, Mrs. Stewart. Don't worry about nuthin'. That five-thousand-dollar reward'll make everything just rosy fer you and the little one."

The sergeant who had ribbed Calahan not so many minutes ago, removed his visored cap and scratched the head beneath it bewilderedly.

"Well, I'll be damned if old 'Mother' Calahan, the family man, hasn't— If that ain't a piece of luck!"

Mike Calahan swelled his chest indignantly—and proudly—as he said in a triumphant boom: "Oh, wise-guy sergeant—so, I'm a family man who's no good goin' after crooks—can't even catch a cold, eh? Well, smart guy, is that baby a boy or a girl? Don't stall around. Answer me!"

The sergeant was ruffled by the traffic cop's disrespect to his rank—but then there was Calahan with a take worth five thousand dollars . . . .

"Well—well, I dunno whut y'mean," he forced out. "How can I tell whether it's a boy or girl. Whut the hell has that got to do with—"

Family Man Mike Calahan thrust out his homely pan and crowed: "You're darn right yuh don't know. It takes a smart family man to know a thing or two." He turned slightly toward Nan Stewart, whose eyes were fascinatedly directed toward his face. "Don't think that a family man like me doesn't know that you wouldn't have said pink clothes to me for a baby boy, Mrs. Stewart, except to put me wise. You were calling the little one *son*—and so was this here rat, Heimer. Pink baby clothes is only fer girl ones; baby boys wear—blue ones."

The sergeant stuttered and stammered while the G-man, whose quick deduction told him most of the story, smiled amusedly.

"Everything'll be okay now for you an' the little one," said Calahan beamingly to Nan Stewart. "That five thousand'll do plenty."

If Mike Calahan had ever boasted before of being a family man, it was nothing to what he spouted from then on. And he got shoved up to Homicide . . . .

A Frame for Dynamite

Gripping Mystery Novelet

By H. H. Stinson

Detective Pat Kilroy worked fast to clear the D.A. of murder in time for re-election. But he found it a suicidal job, trying to get that blonde's body under cover when a savage frameup combo was eagle-eying his every move—with guns ever ready to spit death.

THE voice of District Attorney Gregory Hunt as it came over the wires to the ear of Pat Kilroy was strained, anxiety-ridden. He said: "Get over to my house, Pat. And step on it."

Kilroy's broad shoulders were cramped in the telephone booth. He hunched over the phone to bring his lips closer to the mouthpiece and lowered his voice.

"Right, boss," he said. "Anything serious?"

"Plenty. I can't tell you any more over the phone. How soon can you be here?"

"Ten minutes."

Hanging up, Kilroy headed back for the bar of the Blue Duck Cafe where, according to his nightly custom, he was enjoying the two glasses of beer he went to bed on. His flat-boned, angular face was concerned; it took something very, very grave to put that sound of anxiety into the voice of Greg Hunt, battling little district attorney of River County. At the bar he spun a dime across the mahogany to Axel, the blonde Swedish bartender, and drained the rest of his first glass of beer.

"Yoost wan glass tonight, Mr. Kilroy?" Axel said.

"Ya, yoost wan," Kilroy said, grinning. "Little off my feed tonight, Axel."

A dapper, youngish man with a pasty horse-face said sardonically from a few feet down the bar: "The thought of the election day after tomorrow is what puts him off his feed, Axel."

Kilroy turned, met the youngish man's derisive smile with a blank face.

"Hello, Bergman," Kilroy said.

"Hi, Kilroy. How's the high-powered chief shamus for the D.A.'s office?"

Kilroy said: "Fine. And how's the chief snoop for the *River City Bulletin?*"

"Also fine. What do you think about the election?"

Kilroy shrugged. "Hunt's sitting pretty, in spite of the buckets of mud you and your rag have been trying to sling at him. He'll beat Judge Crissey hands down."

"That," Bergman said, "is what you think."

"And that, after the election," Kilroy said, "will be what you've found out." Turning away, Kilroy winked at the blond bartender. "The air in here is getting pretty bad, Axel. You ought to do something about it—like fixing the ventilating system, or barring *Bulletin* reporters."

He went toward the door of the Blue Duck, heavy-shouldered, flat-waisted. Halfway to the door he suddenly swiveled, went without haste in the direction of a booth in the cocktail room. Sitting in the booth with a blonde woman was a small chunky man with dense, dead-looking black hair, jutting black eye-brows, a flat, tight face.

"Hello, Verona," Kilroy said.

The black-haired man nodded watchfully. "Hello, Kilroy."

"What are you doing in River City?"

Verona's face didn't change. He said, a little sullenly: "Just passing through."

Kilroy put his fingers on Verona's shoulder. He didn't seem to be exerting much strength, but the black-haired man moved uneasily under the pressure. "See that it's just passing through," Kilroy rasped. "Because I meant what I said when I put you on the train six months ago. You may be kingfish of the rackets in your home town but in this burg you're just an unattached heel. River City is out of bounds for you and your mob. So, happy landings—some other place."

The blonde girl looked frightened, and there was a moment of silence. Then Verona said silkily: "I understand the great Hunt, your boss, is coming up for re-election day after tomorrow, Kilroy."

"He is," Kilroy said. "And he's going to be re-elected. So, if you have any ideas, take 'em with you on the first train."

Kilroy's blue eyes bored coldly at Verona, and after a moment Verona's wary stare shifted.

KILROY went out of the Blue Duck and found his car in the parking lot next door. Stepping on it, he hit Fourth Street and then West Boulevard, and seven minutes later stopped with a sputter of gravel against his fenders in the driveway of the big old frame house where Greg Hunt lived alone, save for the unobtrusive presence of a deaf and elderly housekeeper.

A light was on dimly in the front hall and Kilroy pressed a bell button. Behind the glass panel a figure moved and Greg Hunt spoke.

"Who is it?"

"Me—Pat," Kilroy said.

The door came open and Kilroy stepped in. Greg Hunt was a smallish man with a fighter's face. He was pale but in spite of his pallor his bulldog jaw was set and his lips were a thin line.

"They've slipped me a sour one this time," he said.

"What is it, boss?"

"Come in here and take a look."

Kilroy followed the small man down the hallway and into a study.

There was a girl in the study. She lay with her head by a leg of the desk. Blood which had come from a bullet hole in her temple made a mess of her blonde hair and of the taupe carpet on which she sprawled. She had been a girl in her twenties, dressed loudly but expensively, and her face was hard and dissipated even in death. A blue-steel .38 revolver, which Kilroy recognized as District Attorney Hunt's, lay on the desk blotter.

Kilroy stooped, felt the girl's hand. There was still warmth in the flesh. She had been dead no more than thirty minutes, he estimated.

"Swell, isn't it?" Hunt said tonelessly. "I got back alone from the Linden Heights political rally at one-fifteen, just fifteen minutes ago. The house was dark. I came in here, turned on the light and saw this. The girl was dead, and one shot has been fired from my gun. Unless I'm wrong, the lead from that cartridge is in her head and I'm in the middle."

"Your housekeeper hear anything?"

"She's away, visiting a daughter. Any idea who this girl is, Pat?"

Kilroy nodded. "I pinched her a couple of times when I was on the cops. She went under the name of Mamie Hoffman, peddled marihuana and snow for the Boots Busoni narcotic mob."

"And now she's dead in my study with a bullet from my gun in her head," Hunt said. He shook his head, looking grim. "I guess that washes up my election chances, Pat. The race would have been close anyway, and what the papers—especially the *Bulletin*—will do to this story would sink George Washington if he were in my place."

"Keep your chin up," Kilroy said harshly. "The papers don't have to know about it."

"But if the police are notified—"

"They don't have to be notified. The District Attorney's office is investigating this murder, and the first step in the investigation is to get the body out of here." Kilroy picked up the hand-set phone from the desk. He dialed and went on talking to Hunt in a low hard voice while he listened to the ringing signal at the other end of the wire. "Eventually we'd be able to prove it was a frame, but before then the election would be over and you'd be out on your ear. We'll get Clancy to put her on ice over at his mortuary until the polls close. We can trust him. Meanwhile I'll take this town apart, and you go on campaigning as though nothing had happened."

A voice at the other end of the wire said: "Clancy's Mortuary."

"Clancy," Kilroy said, "this is Pat Kilroy. I've got a job for you at Greg Hunt's house. Get over here in a hurry and don't bring your wagon. Use one of your big sedans and drive it up the alley behind the house. Don't ask questions and come alone. Got it?"

FIFTEEN minutes later Kilroy and Clancy, a grizzled, round-faced Irishman, carried a blanketed form out the back door of Greg Hunt's house into the darkness and laid it gently on the rear floorboards of the big sedan that sat without lights in the alley. Clancy eased the door to, climbed under the wheel.

"I don't have to tell you to keep your mouth shut," Kilroy said, low-voiced.

"Sure and you don't," Clancy said. "And if the cops find out about this, I hope you and me get the same cell up the river."

He started the car and Kilroy watched it glide out of the alley and into the street before he went back into the house.

Hunt was smoking a long cigar in the study. A small rug had been thrown over the blood stain on the taupe carpet.

"I suppose a D.A. is entitled to make his own murder investigations," Hunt said, smiling crookedly around the cigar; "but if this little stunt of yours gets out before the polls open, I'll be in a worse spot than if we'd called in the police."

Kilroy shrugged grimly. "You couldn't be in a worse spot, boss. At least, we've got a fighting chance this way."

"Any ideas?"

Kilroy sat down on the corner of Hunt's desk, lit a cigarette, swung his foot slowly. "A few."

"Crissey?"

"No. Crissey's an old fuddy-duddy. As D. A. he'd be the answer to a racketeer's prayer, because he'd never know what the score was. That's why he's wanted in there in your place, but he hasn't got the guts for this."

Hunt nodded. "I think you're right. If Trigger McMahon were still running the rackets here, I'd say it was his work. He not only had the guts for something like this, but he had the brains to figure it out. However we sent him up a year ago and he's still there. With McMahon out, that leaves just punks like Busoni of the junk racket, Jack Wetzel of the slot-machine mob and Roush who ran the loan-shark end for Trigger."

"None of them big enough," Kilroy grunted. "This thing took brains, and the only idea those three ever had was to rub a guy out if he got in their way. But whoever figured this knew if you were murdered, Crissey would have gone in under a cloud. This way you're blanketed with a scandal just long enough before the election so the papers can play it to the skies, and you haven't time to clear yourself. And Crissey isn't touched by any of it. Wait a minute—how about Roger Passmore, managing editor of the *Bulletin?*"

Hunt shook his head decisively. "He's nasty but not this nasty. He'd like to see me thrown out on my ear because I insisted on prosecuting his brother-in-law for those stock frauds, but he wouldn't pull a murder to accomplish it."

They sat thinking. Suddenly Kilroy ground out his cigarette in a soapstone ashtray with quick hard movements of his fingers. He said: "Hell, what's the matter with me? I've got it."

"Got what?"

"You remember Sam Verona?"

"The eastern racketeer we ran out of town?"

"The same," Kilroy said. "At the time we bounced him, Verona was here to pick up where Trigger had left off and organize the town again. All right—he's back in town. I saw him tonight. Boss, I think we've got the angle."

Hunt stood up. He looked excited, a little less desperate. "Pat," he said, "I think you've hit it. Pick Verona up and we'll do some missionary work on him. But you'll have to step on it. If we can't put the solution in the final edition of this afternoon's papers, it'll be too late as far as the election is concerned. You need any help?"

"You might have some of our investigators look around," Kilroy said. "But I think I know where I can pick him up."

They walked together to the front door. Hunt said: "Pat, you're one damn swell guy to have around."

Kilroy grinned. He put his arm around the shoulders of the small man, gripped Hunt's biceps.

"You're one swell guy to be around with," he said. "And if we go down, we go together—and fighting."

Outside the door they shook hands. Hunt said: "I'll do nothing until I hear from you."

"Except keep your chin up."

Hunt smiled grimly. "I'll do that. And keep hoping nobody lands a haymaker on it."

A ROWDY wind racketed through Fess Street, slapping stray papers and debris along the sidewalks, setting arc lights to swinging on their standards and booming against the angles of the old-fashioned flat buildings that lined the street.

Half an hour after leaving Hunt, Kilroy came around the corner into Fess Street from Chadwick Place, where he had parked his car. The wind pasted the tails of his coat against his legs, and Kilroy put his head down and bored through the gusts as far as the third flat from the corner.

In the half hour that had passed, Kilroy had checked the Blue Duck Cafe and found Verona gone from there. All he had been able to find out was that Verona had driven off—alone—in his own car not five minutes after he himself had left. So Kilroy had decided to do the next best thing which was to look up

Boots Busoni, for whom the dead girl had once peddled marihuana and snow.

He went up the steps of the third flat into a small foyer, where the air was dead and stuffy after the freshness of the wind. He climbed a flight of carpeted stairs and stopped in front of a door on the second floor. There he loosened the gun in his shoulder holster and rapped several times, not very hard but not hesitantly.

Finally there was the sound of movement inside. A woman's voice came through the panels in muffled tones: "Who is it?"

"Johnny," Kilroy said in a stifled voice. "Tell Boots I gotta have a deck."

"Johnny Benson?"

"Yeah," Kilroy said, his voice shaking. "I'm g-going crazy, I tell you. I gotta have a deck."

The lock clicked and the door began to come open cautiously. Kilroy walked against it with his knee, his elbow and his shoulder. It went open against resistance and Kilroy stood inside a hallway, smiling down without humor at a red-haired woman whose kimono didn't hide plumpish charms.

"Kilroy," she squealed, her face falling at the sight of him.

" 'Lo, Bessie. Boots home?"

He didn't wait for her reply but went down the hall and into a lighted living room. There was a cadaverous-looking man with an oily dark face just rising from a small desk across the room. He wore green-striped pajamas under a bright yellow silk robe and he looked startled when he saw Kilroy.

"Hi, Boots," Kilroy said. "Nice to find you home."

Boots Busoni's face lost its startled look, took on a sullen, angry cast. "Whatta you want around here, Kilroy?"

"I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

Kilroy shrugged. "About five minutes or about twenty-four hours, depending on how fast you talk."

Their glances locked, Kilroy's hard and contemptuous and Busoni's sulky and faintly apprehensive. After a moment Busoni's eyes shifted. He said: "Go ahead, then."

"Not here. Get dressed."

"Where you taking me, Kilroy?"

"Out. And if you don't want to get dressed, I'd just as soon yank you out in that outfit. So make up your mind fast."

Busoni shrugged concave shoulders, went ahead of Kilroy toward a bedroom door. Kilroy, without talking, motioned Bessie ahead of him and stood by the bed watching Busoni open a closet door. There were a lot of suits in the closet and on a shoe rack at least a hundred pairs of shoes in all leathers and all models. It was the collection that had brought Boots Busoni his nickname.

Busoni touched one pair of shoes at the bottom of the rack, decided against them, chose another pair that he carried out and placed on the bed.

Kilroy watched him find underwear, a bright shirt, a dapper suit. Busoni was getting slowly out of the robe when two men came quickly and quietly through the bedroom door. One of the men was fat and short with rolls of pink flesh showing through his unbuttoned shirt front. His features were small and unpleasant and looked lost in the round expanse of his face. The other man was very young, his skin pitted by pimple scars, and he looked at Kilroy with flat empty eyes.

Busoni smiled thinly. "You were taking me where, Kilroy?"

"Out," Kilroy said. "And I'm still doing it."

He turned his back on the two men, whose hands were ready to draw guns, and, walking over to the closet, lifted the pair of shoes Boots Busoni had touched first. There was a push button in the rack under the heel of one shoe.

"So—a buzzer system," he grinned. "Where does it go, into the flat downstairs? Not that it will do you any good, Boots. If I don't walk out of here with you in ten minutes, my men will crash the place and tear your ears off. Now get smart, call your hooligans off and come along."

He whirled, whipped out his gun and covered the two hoods. The pimply

youth's eyes wavered uncertainly toward Boots, but the fat man stared back at Kilroy unwinkingly. The plump Bessie was behind Kilroy, and he heard her feet move a fraction of a second before a blackjack smashed him on the back of the skull.

The floor and darkness came up to meet him at the same time. When he came out of it, the fat man was sitting on the bed, watching him and holding a black automatic carelessly in his left hand. When Kilroy sat up, the fat man shifted the gun quickly to his right hand and called toward the living room.

BOOTS BUSONI, still garbed in the loud pajamas and robe, came into the bedroom. He was looking at his wrist watch and he curved thin lips into a mocking smile.

"You woke up just in time, Kilroy," he said. "The boys was afraid they might have to lug you."

The pimply youth came into the room behind Boots, and Boots said, turning: "It's quarter to four, Jerry. You got an hour before daylight, and that oughta be plenty time. You're sure there ain't any law staked around outside?"

"I been around the block five times," Jerry said. His vacuous face was expressionless, bored. "He just tried a fast one. If he'd had anybody outside, they woulda been on our necks before this."

"Then get going. The Big Boy told you just how he wanted it done and don't let there be no slip-ups. You drive, and Fats can keep an eye on the shamus." Boots looked at Kilroy again with the thin smile. "Come on, Kilroy—on your dogs."

"Go bite your neck, punk," Kilroy growled.

"If you want another sapping, be stubborn."

Kilroy looked mean and sour, but he climbed to his feet. He clung to the bed for support, and Fats jammed the snout of the automatic into his kidneys. Boots picked up Kilroy's hat, slapped it on Kilroy's head and then they marched him out into the living room, through a kitchen and out onto a back porch. There was a car, dimly outlined, in the alley behind the flat, and with Fats' gun in his back, Kilroy plodded down steps and across a narrow yard to the car.

Fats climbed into the rear seat beside Kilroy and sat close to him with the automatic across his knees. Jerry slid behind the wheel, and the car, without lights, rolled down the alley and into Chadwick Place. Jerry switched the lights on. He drove fast and skilfully.

They sped through side streets until the wide smooth pavement of River Road showed ahead of them. There the pimply youth swung right and began to let the car out.

River Road was empty, desolate at this time. Far-spaced ornamental lamps only served to emphasize the dark stretches between them. At one side and fifty feet below, the river flowed black and soundlessly. Ten miles slid by and aside from one lumbering produce truck they met no other cars.

Kilroy stirred and the gun, a faint shape in Fats' hand, snapped up warily.

"Cigarette," Kilroy explained.

He found a crumpled pack of cigarettes, a paper packet of matches in his overcoat pocket and got them out. Sticking a cigarette between his lips, he rasped a match into flame across the bottom of the open packet of matches. The flame flared and for an instant touched the bunched pink heads of the rest of the matches.

The bunched heads went "whoosh" and Kilroy swore, flung the packet hastily from him. The mass of flame went straight at the eyes of the fat man and he ducked, cursing in a strangled voice. Kilroy's hand shot out and grabbed at the gun in Fats' hand. He got it, twisted just as the gun boomed.

The bullet took Jerry, who had slowed the car and was turning his head, squarely in the right temple. He slid sidewise without a sound and the car began to waltz crazily across the wide pavement toward the curb, toward the fifty-foot drop to the river.

Kilroy put all his weight into a left-hand smash that caught Fats on the side of the jaw, and Fats bounced against

the window ledge, let his fingers loosen on the gun. Kilroy jerked at the gun, got it and with the same movement went forward, leaning over the top of the front seat. He snapped off the ignition, grabbed the wheel, and the sedan lost momentum, came to a stop finally with one front wheel up over the curb.

Kilroy looked down at Jerry in the faint glow of the dashlight. Jerry lay with his mouth open, his face not much blanker in death than it had been, living. Fats was moving and groaning in back of Kilroy, and Kilroy turned. The packet of matches was still burning on the seat beside the fat man. Kilroy kicked it to the floor, opened the door, kicked it out. He climbed out himself and reached a hand back in, jerking Fats to the pavement where he slumped on hands and knees and moaned.

Kilroy said: "Come on, tough baby—tell me things."

"Oh, oh!" Fats groaned. "Oh! My eyes!"

"There's nothing the matter with your tongue—so talk! Who is this Big Boy that Busoni mentioned?"

"I—I don't know."

"Hooey!"

"I swear, Kilroy, I don't know."

Kilroy put his foot against the fat man, rolled him off his hands and knees and onto his back. Kilroy's face was stony. He poked the gun against Fats' forehead.

"You better get your thinker ticking," he clipped, "before I scramble it with a little lead. Is this new hot-shot a guy by the name of Sam Verona?"

Fats trembled and tried to get his head away from the gun.

He said weakly: "If you knock me off the next second, Kilroy, I still don't know anybody higher up than Busoni."

Kilroy scowled but he took the gun away from Fats' head. "All right—where were you taking me?"

"The Shore Inn."

"What for?"

"The—the Big Boy told Busoni you was to be knocked off there."

Kilroy's face was grim but finally he put the gun away in his pocket. He went to the sedan, lifted the limp body of Jerry out from under the wheel and dragged it by the armpits to the curb. Fats had crawled to the side of the road and sat, rocking and moaning and holding his hands to his eyes.

"You've blinded me, Kilroy," he whined.

"That breaks my heart," Kilroy growled. "Remind me sometime to find you a corner where you can sell pencils."

DARKNESS still hung over the river, over the flats between the road and the river bank where the Shore Inn stood, when Kilroy braked the sedan a quarter mile short of the place. He switched the lights off, let the sedan roll to a stop on the shoulder of the road and climbed out. He slogged, hard-heeled, down the concrete of the road until he was within a hundred yards of the weed-grown driveway. There he cut away from the highway through shoulder-high underbrush until he was at the rear of the sprawling buildings.

They were unlit, silent. Kilroy knew the inn had been closed for three years, ever since the advent of repeal had brought better liquors at lower prices than the clip-joint Shore Inn had been known for. He had a vague recollection that Boots Busoni once had had a finger in the place.

Kilroy went noiselessly across the graveled parking space at the rear. He found a door, unlatched and moving a little in a current of dank air that came from inside the building. He pulled the door wide enough to let him in and halted as a board creaked under his foot. For a full minute he remained motionless, listening, and with Fats' gun poised easily in his right hand.

Silence and darkness continued to shroud him. After a little, Kilroy got out the pencil flash he carried in his breast pocket and snapped it on. The thin ray showed him he was in a kitchen which had been stripped of everything except a battered range under a grease-coated ventilating hood.

The flash probed at swinging service doors, and Kilroy went through them

silently into a big bare room with an orchestra dais at the far end. It had been a dining room but tables and chairs were gone, leaving only tarnished tinsel decorations, dusty draperies, a vacant floor covered thickly with dust.

The dust muffled his steps as he went toward a hallway, spurting his flash twice to guide himself. He was almost to the hallway when there was the sound somewhere in the building of a low, agony-wrenched moan. It was repeated twice and then abruptly stifled. The sound halted Kilroy in mid-stride, then started him again, fast but quietly, toward the hall.

He took one step into the hall, glimpsed the dim shape of stairs winding upward. His ears rather than his eyes told him there was something moving at the top of the stairs. The moving shape stilled.

A sharp whisper said: "Fats?"

THERE was thirty feet between Kilroy and the indistinguishable figure. It was too far for an accurate shot, too far to give Kilroy any chance to rush the man.

Kilroy moved forward, put a foot on the lower step. He kept his voice to a whisper, said: "Yeah—Fats."

He didn't put it over. The sharp whisper at the head of the stairs said with consternation: "Kilroy!"

Shots flamed at Kilroy twice. Lead snicked past his cheek, tugged at his right sleeve. Kilroy swore, not in a whisper, and the gun in his fist thundered in the narrow hallway. A pane of glass at the head of the stairs went out with a crash and then running feet drummed along the floor above Kilroy. He hit the stairs, two at a time, but when he got to the top and stopped to listen, there was no hint of anyone in the upper hall but himself.

He was still standing there, motionless, when an automobile starter ground harshly outside. A motor caught, raced, and there was the whir of gears as a car sped down the gravel driveway toward the highway. Then there was silence again.

Kilroy swore feelingly and switched on his pencil flash. It showed him he was in a long hallway. There were a dozen doors giving on the hallway. All save one were closed and secretive. That one stood half open and as Kilroy started for it, there came from the darkness beyond the door the moaning sound he had heard before. He took the last four steps toward the door fast, went through it fast and stepped to one side, his gun swivelling.

The light of his flash quartered the room in a hurry, lit suddenly on a pair of feet in ox-blood buttoned shoes. Kilroy shot the beam up from the shoes over the figure of a man seated in an overstuffed chair. When the light hit the man's face, Kilroy drew one deep breath through his nose, let his mouth fall open a little.

The man in the chair was Boots Busoni.

While Kilroy was still staring, Busoni moaned again. A froth, bright red in the ray of the flash, puffed out from his lips. He shuddered all through his body, his breath rattled loudly in his throat, and he died while Kilroy was taking a step toward him.

Kilroy muttered: "I'm going ga-ga."

He shut his eyes, opened them and looked at the dead man again. The dead man was certainly Boots Busoni, even though Kilroy didn't see how Busoni, who had ordered him taken out to the Shore Inn to be murdered, could possibly have arrived there and been slain himself before Kilroy arrived.

There were also the questions of why Busoni had been killed and who had done it, but Kilroy's brain, in the ten minutes he spent prowling the other rooms along the hall, didn't get within ten miles of guessing the answers. The other rooms had been used in the hi-de-ho days of the Shore Inn as private dining rooms, and thick dust on the floors showed them long unused.

Coming back and standing in front of the dead man, Kilroy shoved his hat back, scratched his head, made another try at figuring it out.

Finally he gave it up. He said to the dead man: "I guess I'm dumb, Boots, but I'm still one up on you. You're dead."

He went through Busoni's pockets, found nothing of importance. He noted that Busoni had been shot through the breast, just over the heart, and he tilted the body forward enough so that he could see the bullet had gone through and into the back of the overstuffed chair.

"Idea," he said softly and let the body slump sideways.

Then he got out his knife and dug at the padding until he had the bullet out. It was not badly battered, and he jiggled it in his palm, gauging the weight. It felt like a .38, and his own gun, missing now, was a .38.

He dropped the slug into his pocket, propped the body back again and went out. Footprints in the dust of the hallway led toward rear service stairs, showing how his attacker had escaped. Going downstairs the way he had come, he carefully scuffed his own footprints wherever they were distinct.

A gray dawn was just breaking when he got back to the sedan. As he slid under the wheel, he suddenly stiffened, cocked an ear.

Far away, from the direction of River City, the sound of a siren dipped and swelled. It was coming fast, too fast to be an ambulance, a fire truck or any sort of an emergency vehicle except a police car.

Kilroy kicked the motor of the sedan into life, spun the rear tires getting under way. If there was anything he didn't want right then it was the chance to trade cracks all morning and maybe all day with a lot of curious cops.

A DOZEN miles above the inn, Kilroy cut into a cross-road that eventually led into a suburb on another main highway leading to River City. He parked the sedan with its blood-spattered front seat on a residential street and walked away casually. Half an hour later he swung aboard a city-bound bus, and it was twenty minutes to ten when the bus slowed and stopped, motor chattering, in the barnlike River City terminal.

Kilroy headed for a phone booth across the shed, barging through waiting crowds with his face glum and thoughtful. Outside, newsboys shouted excited words that didn't penetrate Kilroy's consciousness until one of the newsies invaded the waiting room, waved a paper in his face, yelled: "Read all about it, mister. District Attorney in big murder mystery! Read all about it!"

Kilroy's eyes jerked at the outspread paper, saw it was an early edition of the *River City Bulletin*. In huge red type across the top it said "EXTRA" and below that, in even larger black type, headlines screamed: "GIRL SLAIN IN DISTRICT ATTORNEY HUNT'S HOME."

Kilroy said in a harsh choked voice: "Here, kid." He took a paper, spun the boy a dime and didn't wait for change. He got into a corner out of the way of the crowds and went through the story under the lurid banner in a hurry. It led off with:

District Attorney Gregory Hunt this morning was being grilled by police, it was learned exclusively by the *Bulletin*, in connection with the slaying of a young woman, believed to have been murdered in the official's home last night.

The body of the victim, shot through the head, was found in a local mortuary where police had gone, acting on information which came to the *Bulletin* through an anonymous telephone call, and which immediately was turned over to the authorities. The anonymous caller asserted the woman, identified as Miss Mamie Hoffman, underworld character, had been shot to death by Hunt in his home early this morning and then secretly removed to the undertaking establishment. The motive for the killing, according to the anonymous informant, was the Hoffman woman's threat that she would expose underworld connections of Hunt, who comes up for re-election tomorrow, with Judge Donald Crissey, Reform candidate, as his opponent.

Immediate search of Hunt's home by police disclosed bloodstains on a rug in the district attorney's study.

There was more, much more, to the story, including a sketch of Hunt's career and a cleverly-masked insinuation that it had been common gossip for months that the district attorney's office was on the pay-off list of the underworld.

His eyes dark and humid, Kilroy read the story to the end. Then he riffled through the main news pages, but found

no mention that either the body of Jerry or that of Boots Busoni had been found. However, this edition was an early one and when the *Bulletin* did get wind of the other two killings, it was a certainty the paper would hook them up with the Hoffman girl's murder and put the idea in the minds of the public that Greg Hunt was somehow concerned in all of them.

He growled under his breath: "Sunk, by damn! We're sunk!" Then his long angular jaw got very hard and he folded the paper, rammed it into a trash can beside him. He said: "No, I'll be damned if we are."

His voice was louder than he realized, and an old lady, carrying a scuffed antique of a suitcase, looked at him in alarm and bobbed about uncertainly as Kilroy pivoted, got going toward the phone booth. Kilroy ran into the old lady, knocked the suitcase to the floor, almost knocked her over. He caught her with one hand, scooped up the suitcase with the other.

Restoring the bag to her hand, he said, "Sorry, mother," and kept on going. In the booth he dialed the number of the private line into Greg Hunt's office. Hunt answered.

KILROY said: "This is Pat, boss. I've just seen the *Bulletin*. Can you talk, or is there a mob of coppers with you?"

"Hello, Pat." Hunt's voice was crisp. "I've had half the homicide squad here trying to jump down my throat, but I cleared 'em out. They wanted to pinch me and didn't quite have the guts."

"What'd you tell 'em?"

"Nothing, except that I'd give them a statement later."

"That's the old fight."

Hunt laughed shortly. "Hell, Pat, there's nothing left to do but fight. However, as far as the election's concerned, I haven't got the chance of a celluloid pussycat in a third-alarm fire. Where are you?"

"The bus terminal. I've had a night." Kilroy sketched the night in brief pungent sentences.

There was a little silence. Then Hunt said: "Busoni orders you taken for a ride and you find him rubbed out when you get there. It sounds screwy to me, Pat."

"To me, too. But I'll bet Busoni didn't think it was funny."

"What do you make of it?"

"I'm guessing," Kilroy said. "But I'd say, off-hand, that Busoni had ambitions to be the big shot here and that his ideas got short-circuited around Sam Verona's ambitions. I still think Verona is the lug we want to talk to."

"I believe you're right, Pat, but we'd better find him fast. If we don't crack this case for the final edition of this afternoon's papers, we might as well not crack it at all. That only gives us about six hours."

"I don't believe I'll need that long."

"Want any help?"

Kilroy laughed. "Not with the punk I'm going to operate on. You noticed the *Bulletin* had this story exclusive and that anonymous informant gag smells pretty lousy to me. I'm going to talk persuasively to Jack Bergman, their political snoop, and I think I'll find out where we can locate Verona. You sit tight—or better yet, issue a statement saying later in the day you'll break some news that will rock the town to its foundations."

"Will I?"

"I hope so, boss," Kilroy said fervently. "I hope so."

Kilroy broke the connection, dialed another number. A feminine voice said: "Good morning. This is the *River City Bulletin*."

Kilroy slid his voice down into his throat, made it husky. "I wanta talk to Mr. Bergman."

"One moment, please."

After a little Bergman's voice snapped: "Hello, hello."

"Bergman?" Kilroy asked.

"Yes and I'm busy. What is it?"

In the husky voice Kilroy said: "The *Bulletin's* fighting Hunt, ain't it?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"I thought you could use some dirt on him."

There was a momentary silence. Then Bergman's voice came smoothly. "Certainly. What is it, old man?"

"Your eye, Bergman. This'll cost you dough. It's plenty good."

"Who is this?"

"If you wanta find out, be at Harry's liquor store at Fortieth and Grand at eleven forty-five. And if you ain't in the market for this dirt, say so now."

"I'll be there."

Kilroy hung up with a grin that drew one side of his mouth down, the other up in a strangely humorless grimace.

THE *BULLETIN* was published in a dingy two-story building on the fringe of the business district. At eleven o'clock Kilroy sat across the street from the building, well back in the hooded tonneau of a taxicab, and kept his eyes on the doors.

At ten after eleven Kilroy saw Bergman come out the doors and shoulder his way through knots of newsies, waiting for the noon edition to come off the chutes. Bergman looked sour, sallow, and there was the black stubble of a night's growth of beard on his face. He lit a cigarette, let his eyes slide up and down the street and then went toward a parking lot.

Kilroy leaned over, said: "That's the guy. Let him get out of the lot and around the corner before you get under way."

The cab driver nodded. Two minutes later Bergman drove out of the parking lot in a shiny coupe, new and expensive and fast.

"I dunno if I can stay with that," the hacker said.

"We can't be shot for trying."

Bergman's car made a right turn at the next corner, and the cab got under way.

The chase led across town and then south on Grand avenue from the central traffic district and through a region of vacant lots, dotted thinly with filling stations, real estate subdivision offices, small stores.

At Twenty-fifth Street Kilroy said: "Close in and when you get even with him, cut him to the curb."

The cab driver looked over the partition with a troubled scowl on his middle-aged face. He said: "Listen feller, this looks like it might be pretty rough stuff. I don't know if I like it."

Kilroy palmed his investigator's badge at the man. He said: "D.A.'s office, mister. Maybe I should have mentioned it."

"That's different," the hacker said although he still looked troubled. "You pay for the damage if any, huh?"

"Sure, sure," Kilroy said impatiently. "Step on it."

The driver tramped a heavy foot on the gas, kept it there until they were abreast of the coupe. Then they shot a little ahead and angled across in front. There was a shriek of brakes, a squeal of burning rubber, and both cars came to a standstill. Kilroy had the cab door open, was out on the street before it had quite stopped. He took two long steps that brought him beside the driver's window of the coupé. He jerked the door open, grinned at Bergman's look of panic and got the reporter by one arm.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said. "Going my way?"

Bergman tried to jerk away from Kilroy. He said, making an effort to keep his voice from shaking: "W-what's the idea, Kilroy?"

"You underestimate," Kilroy grinned. "I haven't got one idea—I've got a million. And they're all about you."

His biceps tightened, and Bergman came suddenly from under the wheel, his shoes scraping the running board, and then hitting the street with a thump. His face got long and thin and vicious.

"You're in plenty of trouble now, Kilroy," he said. "This is just piling it on."

"I love trouble. In!"

Bergman tried to lunge away from him. His frantic movement hauled Kilroy halfway around, gave Kilroy an unexpected and lucky glance at the car that was sliding toward them from behind. Even then Kilroy probably wouldn't have suspected anything if one of the men in the car hadn't been Fats, done up in dark glasses and with some kind

of shiny ointment smeared over his singed eyebrows and cheeks.

Kilroy snapped, "Duck!" and slammed Bergman in the jaw with his left. Bergman dropped as though he had been hit on the head with a mallet, and Kilroy let the impetus of the blow carry him down to his knees into the scant shelter of the cab's rear fender.

The car rolling toward them began to belch flame and the high, crashing stutter of Tommy-gun fire. Lead whanged into the rear of the cab, the rear window went out with the crackle of shatterproof glass being shattered, and the cab driver screamed once. All the shots were high, and Kilroy had time to get his gun out, snap one shot at Fats, who held the machine gun, before the other car rolled on and was hidden from him by the cab. He waited a second, two seconds, edged his head up to the level of the cab windows and saw the other car rolling on. He got a sight on one of the rear tires, and as he did so, the Tommy-gun cut loose at him again. The shots were still high, banging into the windshield of the cab, but they made him duck and spoiled his aim. The automatic kicked in his hand twice but the car gathered speed, was out of range in a hurry.

BERGMAN got to his feet. His face was white and he muttered: "Thanks, Kilroy. If—well, thanks."

Kilroy looked at the reporter oddly for a moment. Then he said: "Apparently somebody didn't want you to have a chance to talk to me. Did you get that notion, too?"

"What could I have to talk about?"

The cab driver was disentangling himself from the gear shift, about which his fat shaking body had been wrapped. Blood dripped from a ragged tear on one cheek, but otherwise he seemed unhurt.

He chattered at Kilroy, "I've had a bellyful of you, mister," and jerked the cab into gear, spun in a U-turn and sped back toward the city.

Kilroy grinned at Bergman. "I guess that leaves it up to you, sweetheart. Let's get going."

Bergman hesitated, but under the icy-blue glare of Kilroy's gaze, he finally got behind the wheel. Kilroy climbed in beside him.

"You newshawks have been wondering for a long time," Kilroy said, "where the D.A. took suspects to reason with them. Now you're going to find out. Tipton Street—four-nine-two-two."

"Why should I go there?"

"Because I'm asking you—nicely."

"I happen to be going some place else."

"If," Kilroy said, "it happens to be Harry's liquor store, you can skip that."

Bergman's jaw dropped a little. He said: "You're—you're the guy that called up?"

"I am. Now, do you come with me like a lamb, or do I have to get nasty?"

Bergman started the coupé. When they were a block on their way, he shrugged, said in a puzzled fashion: "I still don't get it, Irish. Am I supposed to be able to do you some good?"

"You don't have to put on an act for me, sweetheart," Kilroy grunted. "I want to find Sam Verona—in a hurry. And unless I'm wrong, you know where I can put the arm on him."

"Does being ga-ga run in your family, Kilroy?"

"Absolutely. And sometimes I go so nutty I slap reporters within an inch of their lives. Now—where's Verona?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Bergman said, making his voice and his face bored. "Why should I?"

"Because," Kilroy clipped, "you're playing stooge for Verona in his try to take over River City. Don't kid me that you got that Hoffman murder story out of the air. The anonymous telephone call gag was too pat. Your sheet hates Greg Hunt, hates him enough to play ball with a rat racketeer like Verona in a dirty, lousy murder frame. Only you're not getting away with it."

"I still say you're crazy."

"You won't find out how crazy," Kilroy said, "until I get you alone."

They went a block farther and Bergman said: "Listen, Kilroy, I've got nothing against you."

"That's dandy. You don't know how I've worried about that."

"You kept me from getting knocked off back there. Understand, I don't think they were throwing lead at me, but if it hadn't been for you, I might have got it. I appreciate it and I'll give you some friendly advice. Take a powder out of town for a while."

Kilroy said nothing, waited.

"You and Hunt are washed up," Bergman said. "The chances are swell that Hunt'll burn for killing the Hoffman girl. And the cops are looking for you for the murder of Boots Busoni."

Kilroy said: "Why?"

"A couple of reasons. Boots' girl, Bessie, told them you walked Boots away from their apartment at the end of your gun. And somebody turned your gun over to them this morning—I don't know who. And they found that it matched the bullet that killed Boots out at the Shore Inn."

"Interesting," Kilroy said smoothly. "And you're tipping me off to lam just because you like me."

"Not entirely. To be honest, I haven't got any yen to be socked around by you, and you seem to be in a socking mood."

Kilroy said: "Tipton Street is next. Turn left."

The house at 4922 Tipton Street was a small frame building, neat-looking, white-painted. Kilroy waited on the curb until Bergman climbed out beside him. Then he took Bergman's arm, and they walked up a short concrete walk and onto a porch.

"Cosy," Kilroy grinned. "Just the place for a friendly talk."

Bergman looked pale, jittery, as though he didn't relish what he saw in Kilroy's face. Kilroy got out keys and while he was choosing one, the door opened in their faces. Greg Hunt, his small body erect and cocky, looked out at Kilroy.

He said: "What's this you're dragging in here, Pat?"

"I found it under a rock down at the *Bulletin* office."

Bergman said shakily: "You guys are pretty funny."

Kilroy stood to one side and after a moment's hesitation Bergman went inside. Kilroy went in after him and closed the door.

"Boss," Kilroy said gravely, "Mr. Bergman insisted on coming here with me so he could tell us where Sam Verona is."

Hunt smiled and shook his head. "He doesn't have to, Pat. Verona's right here."

"No!"

"Yes. A couple of the boys picked him up half an hour ago down at the Pacific Eastern depot. I brought him out here—I thought you'd be showing up."

"What does he say?"

"Nothing, except that he wants a lawyer."

Kilroy grinned. "Didn't you tell him you were one?"

"He doesn't seem to like me," Hunt said.

Kilroy rubbed his hands. "Maybe when we get Sam and Mr. Bergman together, we'll start to learn things. March, sweetheart!"

THEY went down the hall and into a comfortably-furnished living room, where Sam Verona sat sullenly in a big chair. His wrists were manacled and he had a mussed-up look considerably at variance with his sleek appearance of the night before. He scowled at Kilroy.

There was a heap of personal belongings on a table—a wafer-thin watch with the initials S.V. on the back, a wallet bulging with money, keys, cigarettes, a platinum lighter, a long green railroad ticket that read, "River City to Miami."

Kilroy said: "Hello, Verona."

"Hello, Kilroy," Verona said warily.

"I dropped around with a friend of yours."

Verona turned slitted eyes on Bergman, said: "He's no friend of mine."

"You don't know him?"

"I know him, but he ain't a friend of mine."

"How about you, newshawk?" Kilroy said. "Do you know Verona?"

Bergman looked apprehensive but he managed a shrug. "Certainly I know Verona. Any newspaper man does. What of it?"

"At least," Kilroy said, "we're this far—you know each other. Also, we know somebody hung a murder frame on Hunt.

I have one of the old Kilroy hunches that it was Verona and, as I may have hinted, the same hunch tells me you were in on it, Bergman. So the next step is for somebody to talk. Will it be you, Verona?"

Verona had his chin on his chest with knots of muscle at the corners of his jaw. His eyes looked balefully, stubbornly at Kilroy. He said: "You couldn't make me talk, even if I knew what you wanted, Kilroy. I been batted around by experts."

Kilroy shucked his overcoat, smiled amiably. "I believe you're right, Verona. I heard your home-town cops put you in the hospital three times on one case without making you talk. It's lucky we've got Bergman. I doubt if he can take it that well."

Kilroy got down to his shirt, rolled up sleeves on corded arms. Bergman, looking white and sick, got his back to the door.

He gulped, said: "You won't pull that third-degree stuff on me if you're smart."

"What third-degree stuff?" Kilroy said cheerfully. "You're resisting an officer, that's all. Isn't he resisting an officer, boss?"

Hunt scratched his head. "He looks to me as though he meant to resist an officer."

Bergman suddenly jumped to one side, darted past Kilroy and dived headlong at a window. Kilroy got him by the nape before he hit the window and hauled him back. Bergman squalled, grabbed at the nearest thing, which happened to be the drapery that had been pulled across the window. The drapery rod came loose and both Kilroy and Bergman went down, tangled in the flopping folds of damask.

Kilroy swore, fought his way out of the smother and came up, still holding the reporter by the collar.

He growled: "I hate to do this to any guy, but you're going to hate it worse."

He put a foot against a leg of Verona's chair, shoved it toward the wall. "Everybody stay out of the way—I need room to bounce this lug around."

From the lawn outside a shadow suddenly fell across the unmasked window. Kilroy looked, saw a man's head against the glass, saw that it was Fats. The next instant the glass had been punched out with gun steel and the muzzle of a submachine gun came poking through the opening.

Fats yelled: "Duck, boss—I'll take 'em!"

Sam Verona went over sidewise in his chair. The chair tottered and spilled him on the floor, where he squirmed around, trying to stay out of line of the swivelling muzzle at the window. Greg Hunt threw himself flat on the floor, one hand tugging at a gun in his hip pocket. The machine gun began to stutter in Hunt's direction and a leaden hail splintered the floor just by his head. The Tommy-gun bucked in Fats' hands, and the next burst went over Hunt's head, pocking the wall. A radio against the wall went "bong," and a vase on top of the radio suddenly burst into a thousand pieces.

It was all happening so fast that Kilroy was still hanging onto Bergman's collar when the gun started to swing around toward them. Kilroy roared something—he never did know what it was—and flung Bergman from him with a surge of back and shoulder muscles. Bergman stumbled into a corner and collapsed in a heap.

Kilroy's gun jumped into his hand, began to kick almost before its butt was settled against his palm. Glass blasted out of the wrecked window by Fats' head. A long shard, sharp as a razor, raked redly across Fats' cheek, and for an instant the machine gun stopped its mad chatter. Then it started again and red-hot pain seared across Kilroy's ribs as a slug caught him. He disregarded the agony, aimed coolly, fired again.

Fats' body, what Kilroy could see of it, jerked sidewise. The movement brought the machine gun, still blasting, around toward Sam Verona, crouched behind the inadequate protection of his chair. Slugs ripped through the chair, tore holes in Verona's face and throat, holes that suddenly spouted crimson. Verona flung his manacled wrists high in the air as though in a vain plea to heaven for mercy, and slid from his haunches

into a limp, still mass of flesh behind the splintered chair.

Fats fell out of sight below the window sill and the Tommy-gun ceased its clamor.

KILROY spun on his heel, made for the door. Pain clutched him across the ribs and blood was seeping down across his hip, but he pulled the door open and slammed out and down the hall. He got out the front door and onto the porch.

There was a car pulling away from the curb, the same car from which he had been raked with the machine-gun barrage back there on Grand Avenue. There were two men in the car, but neither of them were Fats.

Kilroy darted around the corner of the house. Fats wasn't there and the Tommy-gun wasn't there, but a trail of blood spots led across the bright greenness of the lawn between houses and toward the alley at the rear. Kilroy loped toward the alley. His side hurt and he swore sourly, but he kept running.

He got to the alley, caught a glimpse of Fats at the far end, near the street, running in a weaving, staggering fashion, and he sent one shot above Fats' head. The fat man turned the corner out of the alley and then almost instantly popped into view again. The Tommy-gun came up and lead chopped at Kilroy. Kilroy ducked behind a tall garbage can. Slugs thudded into the can; it shivered and spilled refuse into Kilroy's face but none of the bullets hit him. The crashing sound of the gun stopped, and after a moment Kilroy edged his head above the can. Fats was gone, and Kilroy went after him, not too fast. He knew from the way the man had staggered and weaved out of the alley that he was too badly wounded to get very far very fast; but there wasn't anything the matter with the way he wielded the Tommy gun.

Kilroy reached the end of the alley, stuck his head cautiously around a fence corner. Fats was a hundred yards away. He was running, but very slowly. Kilroy started after him, let out reefs in his long legs. He was within fifty feet of the man, when Fats suddenly stopped, whirled and brought up the machine gun. Sun glinted on the barrel, glinted on the dark glasses Fats still wore, on the shiny ointment around his eyes. His teeth showed in a mad snarl and he looked like some sort of a huge, goggled animal, gone berserk.

Kilroy's automatic came up, too. He barked harshly: "Drop it, you idiot!"

The Tommy-gun began to steady, to center on Kilroy and Kilroy swore and squeezed his automatic. The automatic roared once in the narrow street, bringing echoes back from the fronts of houses, like thunderclaps.

Fats dropped the machine gun, took two steps backward slowly and then a dozen steps that became faster and faster until he suddenly fell as though he had backed into a knee-high obstacle. When Kilroy got to him, he was dead. There was a bullet hole just between his eyes, a ragged cut across his cheek where the glass had raked him, a blood-soaked tear across the left shoulder of his coat, where Kilroy's first bullet had ripped through.

Kilroy picked up the machine gun, said under his breath: "You were a lousy citizen, Fats, but I'll have to admit you were a hog for punishment. Yes, sir, a hog for punishment."

He picked up the Tommy-gun, went back toward the house.

He was whistling when he went through the front door and still whistling when he went into the living room. Bergman was sitting on the lounge, holding his head in his hands, and Greg Hunt looked sourly out through the broken window. When Kilroy came in, Hunt turned. Kilroy winked at him, dropped the Tommy-gun to a chair, stood rubbing his hands.

"What," Hunt snapped, "have you got to be merry about?"

"Why not, boss?"

Hunt banged the table wrathfully with his small fist. "Why not? Because our man is dead—and I've never yet been able to make a dead man talk himself into jail. And if we don't jail somebody for the Hoffman girl's murder inside of the next hour, I lose the election. That's why not."

"Boss, for once you're wrong," Kilroy said. He looked at the body of Verona by the splintered chair. "Verona is dead, but our man isn't."

"What do you mean?"

Kilroy jerked a thumb at Bergman. "There's our man."

BERGMAN slowly took his head out of his hands. He said in a shaky voice: "Have you gone nuts again, Kilroy?"

"Not me." Kilroy shook his head. "Maybe you did when you figured a smart newspaper man could step into McMahon's shoes and take over all the town's rackets. At first I had you figured just as Verona's stooge. The first suspicion I got that maybe you were the master mind all by yourself was when they turned that typewriter loose on us over on Grand Avenue. They kept firing high, although they could have got me if they had fired low. Why didn't they fire low? Because you were right behind me, and they might have hit you. Then we get here and find that Verona was all set to leave for Miami. That didn't make sense, if he had framed the D.A. and was ready to take the town over as soon as Hunt was defeated. And, finally, when Fats poked his stutter-gun through the window, he yelled: 'Duck, boss.' "

Bergman snarled: "Well, it was Verona that ducked, not me."

Kilroy smiled, shook his head. "Verona ducked because he was scared. If Verona had been the 'boss' Fats meant, he wouldn't have had to be warned. None of us were near Verona, and Fats could have cut us all down without touching him. Fats meant you, sweetheart."

Bergman's face was perfectly white, and his small black eyes looked like lumps of coal in a snowbank. He got a cigarette lit with some difficulty and said: "Guesses, Kilroy. Bum ones."

Hunt had listened quietly, his rugged face enigmatic. Now he said slowly: "Can you prove this, Pat?"

"Certainly," Kilroy said. "With the help of Fats. He's not hurt bad and I've got him around the corner, manacled to a lamp post and waiting for an ambulance. I told him we'd let him cop a plea if he'd talk. So he did. He claims Bergman cooked up this whole mess, killed the girl—"

Bergman bounced up from the lounge, flung the cigarette from him. He cried hoarsely: "He's a dirty, lousy liar, Kilroy. He killed the girl, and if he thinks, the rat, that he can cop a plea and fix me to burn, I'll—"

He broke off. Kilroy shrugged, said: "I've noticed that at a time like this, it's every rat for himself."

Bergman stared at the floor for a little. Then he jerked his head up, fixed Hunt with burning, panicky eyes. He said: "Listen, Hunt, you want to be D.A. again. All right, if I spill my guts on this, you'll walk away with the election. In return, would you be reasonable and let me get the book instead of the hot seat?"

Hunt said evenly: "The D.A.'s office can't promise anything like that. But usually when a man makes it easy for the law, the law makes it easier for him."

Bergman hesitated a moment. Then he made a visible effort at nonchalance. "Okay, I'll talk. Fats came to me six weeks ago and propositioned me to get together with him and step into McMahon's spot at the top of the rackets. He was to take care of all the rough stuff, and I was to furnish the brains and the contacts that I had through my job. We wanted Crissey in as D. A. because he could be handled, so I figure out the murder frame on Hunt, and Fats pulled it. That's all."

"Not quite all," Kilroy prodded. "Why did you kill Boots Busoni? I didn't take time to ask Fats about that, but I will. Or maybe you'd rather get your version in ahead of his."

BERGMAN'S face was crafty but Kilroy could almost see the lightning calculations going on behind it.

"Self defense," Bergman said. "He was sore about me stepping into the number-one spot, even though he put on a front that he was working with me. As soon as you were taken away, he got me to go out to the inn with him to make sure you got it. We must have hit River

Road ahead of you, because we didn't pass your car. Out there he tried to kill me, and I beat him to the punch."

"My idea," Kilroy grunted, "is that you're telling it backwards. And that Boots didn't beat you to the punch. Not that it matters much now, but how did you get Bessie to put the finger on me?"

"Bessie hated Boots because he'd been kicking her around, and I promised to let her step into the top spot in the junk racket. It was—"

The front door opened with a bang, and feet slammed down the hall. A uniformed cop stood in the living room doorway, suspicious-eyed. He barked: "Who killed that fat guy around the corner there?"

Bergman's jaw dropped. He said in a choking voice: "You mean the fat guy? You mean he's dead?"

"Dead? Who wouldn't be dead with a bullet between the eyes?"

Bergman said: "Whew!" He gave a long, relieved sigh. Color began to return to his face and he grinned at Kilroy and Hunt. "Well, well, Kilroy," he said, "apparently Fats didn't have all that to say to you, after all."

Kilroy shrugged. "You've confessed enough for two, sweetheart."

"Me confess? Kilroy, you're crazy—I've got nothing to confess." He swiveled his eyes at the cop, said: "Officer, these two men—both of them murder suspects—have been third-degreeing me in an effort to make me take their crimes on my shoulders. I demand your protection."

Hunt said: "Don't get excited, officer. And, as for you, Bergman, don't get too happy."

He walked to a cheap, framed watercolor on the wall above Verona's body, twitched the picture aside. Underneath it was a dictograph ear.

Kilroy had watched Hunt with a grin. He turned the grin on Bergman. "Didn't I mention this was where we hid out our special suspects to talk to them. We've got those gadgets all over the place, and everything you said is down on wax on the recording machine in the cellar. Nobody will have to take our word. All they need is yours."

Bergman gave Kilroy one long stricken look. Then he collapsed on the lounge, stuck his head in his hands again and groaned: "Me! Imagine me, getting my foot caught in the oldest trap in the world! Me!"

Hunt smiled, smacked his fist into his palm. He said to the policeman: "You know who I am?"

"You're District Attorney Hunt, ain't you?"

"I am. And you can take this man down and book him on murder."

The policeman got his handcuffs out, took a step toward Bergman. Bergman got up wearily, managed to shrug.

"You win, Kilroy," he said. "But you've got to admit it almost worked. You've got to admit it was a beautiful frame."

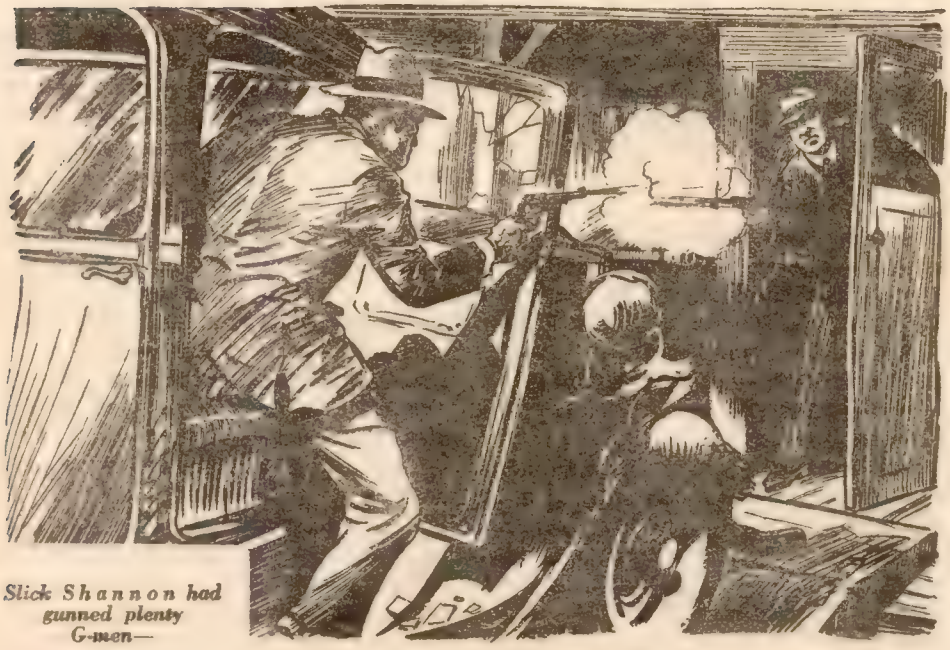
"I'll give you that," Kilroy said. "It was a beautiful frame, but it was a frame for dynamite that blew up in your face."

"Exactly." Greg Hunt chuckled, dug his stiffened thumb jovially into Kilroy's bullet-creased ribs. "And Pat was the dynamite."

Then pain made Kilroy jump six inches.

"All right, all right, boss," he grumbled. "But is that anything to do to dynamite?"

Dame Death



Slick Shannon had gunned plenty G-men—

By S. J. Bailey

Author of "Copper's Hate Beat," etc.

She was a pick-up murder dame, who cold-bloodedly tossed her victims from a low-hung, powerful roadster. But that mystery hiker, carrying an innocent duffle bag weighted with death, was willing to thumb his way into her treachery car to pierce the secret of the green eyeshade she always wore.

THE low-hung, gray roadster slithered along the ribbon of concrete, a giant bug scuttling across the warm, green-and-yellow blocked linoleum of the farm country.

The driver, a comely blonde wearing a green eyeshade attached to a headgear lattice of white tape, paid no attention to the man at her side. He was dead.

His body was still warm to the touch, but its warmth did not attract her. She huddled as far from it as possible. From one corner of her rouged mouth, a cigarette drooped at a careless angle. A tight pullover snugged down around her softly rounded shoulders. A rough tweed skirt moulded itself to her perfect waist, and a pair of pert feet nosed into high-heeled pumps, one of which inexorably clamped the accelerator to the floor board.

The bullet wound in the man's left side had been bleeding freely. Blood soaked his clothing and seeped out onto the leather cushions. A couple of greasy rags were bunched against his hip to absorb the blood. Now and then, as the car rounded a curve, the body swayed grotesquely toward her. She pushed it back with a shuddering gesture, and shoved the wads of rags closer to it.

The green eyeshade tilted quickly upward every few moments, as the blonde peered anxiously into the rear-view mirror. Reflected in the tiny oblong of glass, the gently winding road coursed emptily backward like newsprint spilling from an inkless press at breakneck speed.

The long, white needle on the dash hovered dodgedly between eighty and ninety until presently the face of the countryside underwent an abrupt change. The road tongued in among dense woods, and the car was swallowed by a maw of overhead, interlocking branches.

The great machine slackened speed, edged into a rutted by-way, nosed through encroaching underbush, and came to a stop on a narrow wooden bridge. Willows sadly trailed green fingers in a brown stream that rolled turgidly under the rickety structure, swollen by spring rains.

The blonde thrust open the door with a red-nailed hand that trembled slightly. She pushed the body out, and it fell to the dusty planking, with head dangling over, a few feet from the water. She wiped the cushion carefully, wadded the rags and threw them over the railing. The rushing stream caught them and whipped them out of sight. Then she stepped to the running board and thrust her foot down, shoving the body over the edge. It took the water with a loud splash and sank from sight.

She glanced fearfully up and down, tooled the car around and headed for the open highway.

The wheels of the great car paralleled swiftly as it swung back onto the concrete. The girl glanced anxiously in the mirror as the car swiftly gathered speed. The road was empty.

The motor hummed steadily for perhaps three or four minutes. In the distance a red and white gasoline sign loomed. The girl glanced at her gas gauge and frowned. The needle was dangerously close to the letter "E."

She glanced again into the mirror and quickly sucked air through parted lips. Her frown deepened, and her eyes mirrored fright. She threw one hasty look over her shoulder, as if for an instant she doubted the mirror. But there was no mistake. The road had been empty a few moments before; now there was a rickety flivver, tooling along at a considerable pace.

Where had it come from?

The blonde suddenly twisted the wheel and sent the car skidding into the drive between rows of pumps. Its rear wheels made parallel ruts in the gravel where they ground to a halt, locked.

The attendant bobbed up from behind the building, a wad of waste trailing from a pocket of his faded-blue overalls, a chaw of tobacco working slowly in his cheek.

"Nice day, miss," he observed, and squinted through filmed spectacles. "High test or regular?"

"Fill it up," ordered the girl. "High test."

SHE lit a cigarette and watched the road out of the corner of her eye. Pretty soon the flivver came along, its engine spitting alarmingly. It was an old Model "T", and very muddy. It was doing fully thirty-five. There were two men in it, and they looked straight ahead.

The girl's eyes followed it speculatively, while her hand pulled at her skirt. She drew it up over her knees, disgorged a roll of bills from a leather pouch strapped to the inside of her bare leg. She peeled off a twenty and passed it out to the attendant.

The attendant delivered himself of a thin stream of tobacco juice, drew the back of his hand across his mouth and plucked the twenty from her hand. He wagged his head and puckered his forehead.

"Ain't got smaller, have ye, miss?"

The blonde shook her head.

"Well—" The attendant disappeared back of the station for a couple of minutes and finally came back with a handful of crumpled one-dollar bills.

The blonde grabbed the change and threw the car into gear. The car leaped into motion, and the attendant stood squinting after it, his jaw working re-

flectively. "Mighty funny. Purty as a picture, and frettin' around like she was a-scared all hell'd pop out at her."

THE man driving the flivver waited until the gas station had dropped about two miles behind. Then he reached in under the dash and touched a small toggle switch. The spitting motor began at once to purr smoothly. The car no longer shook and rattled. It leaped ahead, and its speedometer quickly registered sixty-five.

"Smooth, isn't she?" remarked the man at the wheel. He was lean and hard-muscled. His knees almost touched the dash. The light tone of his comment did not wipe the grave intentness from his face.

"Like a kitten with its belly full of cream," said the other, with a quick grin which vanished as he cast a sidelong glance at his companion.

"She'd fool anybody almost. The switch cuts out four of the spark plugs and throws the crankshaft lopsided. She sounds like she'll fall apart at thirty-five. But when you cut the plugs back into the firing circuit, she balances up again and hums like a million bucks."

"You sure that was the Garick dame's car?"

"No mistake—4Y-62-50."

"Well, you better drop me along here, Pete. I got a hunch."

"Hell, Bert. They don't call her the Pick-up Dame for nothing. You better—"

"Come on. No stalling. I got to get going. She'll be along in a minute."

The driver obediently slowed. His passenger hopped out. "Hand me that duffle bag, Pete."

The driver frowned, then shrugged. "Okey, Bert. But you better watch her. She picks 'em up and dumps 'em in a ditch. She's dynamite."

"Step on it! I hear a car."

The driver reached hurriedly into the tonneau and shoved out a canvas bag, about four feet long. It was stuffed full. The man in the road grabbed it hastily.

"Careful, Pete. I don't want that Tommy-gun to get out of kilter."

"If that dame picks you up, watch your step, Bert. I'm telling you, she's bad medicine."

"Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

"Um. But maybe you won't fool her none. If she smells a rat, she'll bump you sure as—"

"Better get going," warned the man in the road.

"Okey."

The flivver with the special engine roared away.

THE road was wide and smooth, but winding. The big, gray roadster, threading its way through the wooded, hilly country, topped a gentle rise, rounded a curve and suddenly slowed down.

The blonde had seen the man trudging wearily along and had flicked her foot off the accelerator. One of his arms swung freely at his side after the manner of a veteran hiker. The other held the rope of a duffle bag which hung at his back.

When the light hum of the approaching machine reached his ears, he paused abruptly, and turned, swinging the bag off his shoulder. He raised his right thumb and shuttled it across his shoulder in the age-old hitch-hike gesture.

The girl did not immediately stop. She allowed the car to travel past him, bringing it to a halt about a hundred feet beyond. Her chin went up coolly and her eyes peered from under the green shade into the mirror. The small oblong of silvered glass gave her a pleasant action picture of the man as he hurried to overtake her.

He wore a khaki work shirt, faded, open at the neck. It was carelessly thrust into a pair of worn, baggy trousers. He was massively built, and his stride was long. He came up alongside the car and smiled inquiringly.

His eyes were a disarming shade of blue that made his face an open book for anyone to read. His smile brought attractive crinkles around his mouth.

"I beg pardon, ma'am. I was looking for a lift. Didn't know I'd thumbed a

lady." He laughed a little self consciously. "You—don't mind?"

"Hop in, handsome," said the girl, "and can the ceremony. What'd you suppose I braked the tub for? To get a load of your eager, shining fizz?"

The smile took on a puzzled tinge, but he got in and settled the duffle bag between his knees. His knee touched hers, but she did not seem to notice. She was shifting gears, at the same time casting a covert glance in the mirror. Her eyes went hard as she glimpsed a car roaring around the curve behind.

The needle crept rapidly past fifty, sixty, seventy. The car was quickly left behind.

The girl gestured familiarly with her head. "It's my guess you got all you own in the world in that bag. Right?"

The man started, looked at her, caught her sidelong grin of comradeship, and grinned b a c k good-naturedly. "I'm fussed if I can see how you knew that, ma'am."

"Ha, ha," laughed the girl. "I'm a swell guesser, feller. I can even go further and say you haven't got a job or a family, and you're having a hell of a time getting along on account of the depression."

The man shook his head in open wonderment. "That's pretty close. I did have a little poultry farm, but they took it away from me in '30. Right now I'm flatter than a doormat. Only relation I got is an old aunt up in Washington State. It sure beats me, ma'am, how you—"

"Cut out the 'ma'am' stuff," said the girl. "We'll be trekking a ways together, so we might as well get acquainted. You call me Nina."

The man looked doubtful, yet a little pleased. "Well, sure, if you say so, ma'am—I mean, Nina. My name's Bert—Bert Dunham, from Takoma."

Nina offered him a cigarette. There was silence for a few minutes while they both took deep drags, pleased expressions hovering about their faces. Then she shot a question at him:

"Like to cop yourself a grand, Bert?"

Dunham looked startled. "Eh? A what?"

"A grand—a thousand smackos," repeated Nina, crowding the accelerator pedal to the floor. The white needle danced between eighty and ninety.

Dunham whistled. He stared dazedly at the road ahead, then at Nina's profile. Its lines were softer now than they had been while she was ejecting her dead passenger. Finally he licked his lips, and his Adam's apple bobbed once or twice as he said:

"What do I have to do?"

"Get hitched," clipped out Nina, through compressed lips. The car careened around a curve without slackening speed. The sound of screeching, scorching rubber smote their ears.

"You—you mean marry—marry somebody?" he gulped.

Nina glanced calculatingly up and down his lean, hard frame. Then she grinned easily. "Sure—why not? You're not such a bad-looking guy. You'd do all right."

"Hey, wait a minute! Let's get this here straight. You mean you want me to hitch up with *you?*"

She took her eyes off the road and gently inspected him again, her tongue tentatively investigating her cheek lining, amusement in her gaze. "What's the matter, feller? Do I strike you that bad?"

Dunham's eye clung appreciatively to her soft curves. "No, no," he protested, "it ain't that; it's only you sprung it so sudden. And a thousand bucks. It's—"

"Listen, guy," Nina's voice suddenly took on a warning, chilling quality, "just so's you'll get your ear closer to the ground, and faster, let me tell you this isn't a fireman's picnic. Listen—you ever hear of Silk Shannon?"

Dunham's jaw dropped. There was a fearful questioning in his gaze. "You mean the—the guy they call Public Enemy Number One?"

"The same. I—I was his moll." The girl's lips quivered as she made the statement.

DUNHAM'S first reaction was to glance quickly through the rear window and scan the road to the rear.

"Don't worry. They drilled him plenty. He's—he's dead." She pronounced the last word with an effort.

"Hell," said Dunham. "That's tough. Er—I mean—"

"I know what you're thinking." Nina's little chin went up, and she nodded grimly. "He had it coming. Well, maybe he had. Silk Shannon gunned plenty G-men in his time."

"Where'd it happen—at Swan Lake?"

She nodded. "Somebody tipped the feds. They were closing in and our lookout spotted 'em. Silk and I split and powdered. I made it. They opened up on him with a Tommy-gun. He stopped hot lead."

Dunham laid a quick hand on her knee. "Hell," he said. "I'm—I don't know what to say."

"Well, you can cut it, see? He got the works, and I'm on the loose. While he was alive I stuck by him, no matter what kind of fool messes he got himself into. But now I want to get back on the right side of the law—only I can't, see? They'll hound me to hell until they pump me full of lead. Those G-men are riding wild. All I can do is get out of the country and maybe I can make a start somewhere."

"And you want to get hooked with me and cover your way out as my wife. That it?"

"Yeah, that's it. Will you give a guy a hand?"

It took Dunham a few moments to muster a reply. Finally he ran the tip of his tongue around his lips and said with quiet determination:

"Why, I guess I kind of feel like I got to string along with you, Nina. You—you're a pretty decent kid, in spite of—of—"

"Sure, feller," said Nina. "You'll find me grateful—besides the grand. But—" her voice chilled menacingly— "in case you should feel like weakening when we run into a posse or a nest of feds, I'd gum your works with this." She showed him an automatic, which she flipped from a holster inside her thigh, just above the knee.

Dunham stared. "Hell," he said, "you're kidding." His hand flicked the ashes of his cigarette nervously over the side of the car.

"Think so? Watch this." She shoved the gun back into its holster with her right hand, then put her right hand back on the wheel. Her eyes watched the road as she moved, and the needle maintained its position a couple of points above eighty. Her left hand flashed downward, and a second later the gun was close to Dunham's ribs as her arm jack-knifed across her stomach.

Dunham edged himself into the corner of his seat, and he stared down fascinated at the business end of the little automatic.

"The last guy," her voice was icy, "that rode where you're sitting went Romeo on me, and I let him have a slug in his guts. Then I dumped him in a mud hole in the woods. You'll get the same if you—"

"Don't worry none about me, ma'am—I mean, Nina," broke in Dunham hastily. He looked worried. "I'll—I'll play along."

Nina put the gun away, giving a little satisfied nod. The car shot ahead in silence for a few minutes. They were climbing gradually; the woods were getting thicker.

Dunham broke the silence: "We're getting kind of close to the border. Not many towns in this wild section. Where you calculate to—er—get hitched?"

She glanced at him quickly. "Get hitched? Oh!" Her eyes pivoted back to the road, and her pretty mouth gave birth to a quick little burst of laughter.

Dunham looked sheepish. "I see. I guess I was jumping to conclusions."

"Hell, you ought to know better," she said, grinning. "In the first place you don't want to commit bigamy. I got a drummer husband wearing his fool shoe leather off in Kansas City—at least that's where he was when I last heard of him. In the second place, wouldn't we be saps to walk right into the arms of the law to get a ceremony performed. And what'd we gain. Anybody'll take our word if we just travel together as man

and wife. Gee, feller, but you're a refreshing breath from the haymow."

Dunham's look was more sheepish. "Sure, sure, you're—you're right, Nina."

"From now on all you have to do, big boy, is look pretty and follow me. We're Mr. and Mrs. Hal Dunham, in case we run into a posse or a nest of G-men. Tonight we hang out in a cabin I know of up in the woods. Tomorrow we head for the border."

Presently the powerful car slewed off the concrete onto a winding macadam road that forced the needle down between forty and fifty. Nina swore at the curves and kept darting fearful little glances in the rear-vision mirror.

After a while she abandoned the macadam for a narrow, rutted dirt track at a spot where two giant twin oaks had been struck by lightning. From the way she intently scanned the two trees, it was plain they were some sort of guidepost marking the road.

A little more than an hour of jouncing through a thickly grown young forest, and the machine suddenly swerved, threshing between dusty bushes, and burst into a clearing where stood a ramshackle cottage.

THERE was a salty tang in the air. The clearing was located on a body of deep, blue water. There was an old ice-house and a small dock to which was tied an ancient rowboat. Tiny waves lapped placidly at the pilings of the dock, and a lone seagull flapped its wings lazily overhead.

Dunham slung his duffle bag carefully out of the car, then stretched in relief, expanding his chest with gusto. He seemed to have shaken off the disquietude that he had displayed on sight of the gun. During the latter part of the ride, they had conversed desultorily and the girl had seemed to develop a little more confidence in him.

"A swell spot!" he cried. Then, his eye twinkling, he shot a sidelong glance at Nina and added: "For a honeymoon."

She got out of the car but did not remove the eyeshade. She opened the rear compartment and began to extract packages of food from in front of the rumble seat. As she worked, she kept darting cautious little glances around the clearing and at the spot where they had entered.

"Come on, handsome, get busy. I'm hungry like nobody's business."

Dunham grinned, holding his arms while she stacked packages against his chest, up high under his chin. He eyed her closely. She didn't look formidable as she concentrated on the simple task. When her mind was off the subject of guns and killing, and when she was not in any immediate danger, she appeared human enough. Dunham's eyes kept straying from her face, down along the curves of her nicely rounded body, which the tight sweater and skirt showed off to advantage.

"It'll likely be a right-fine moon tonight, Mrs. Dunham," he ventured boldly.

She said nothing. Her lips pressed together in thin lines.

"Seems to me you're a right handsome bride, Mrs. Dunham," he pursued, "providing you'd take that plagued doojigger off your eyes."

She flashed him a sharp frigid look, contemplated him for a moment in silence. Then: "A bargain's a bargain, feller. Am I gonna have trouble with you?"

Dunham turned away with his arms full, strolling toward the back door of the cottage. "Okay, Nina," he spoke over his shoulders. "But—" he suddenly swung around and faced her, his tones mockingly severe —"would you mind telling me what body of water it is that an irate bride of two hours might have to throw her husband into if he gets out of hand?" He smiled as he spoke, but tense interest lurked behind the clowning mask of his question.

Nina laughed. There wasn't anything dangerous-looking about a big, good-natured boy with his arms so full of miscellaneous packages that he had to tilt back his chin to hold the top one.

"I like you, feller. You're entertaining to have hanging around the joint. That's

an inlet from the ocean. I don't know the name of it."

"And that land over there?" He motioned with his head, almost losing the stack of bundles.

"Canada," she replied briefly.

"I see. You're almost out of the soup, eh?"

"No. The trickiest part is coming." She glanced anxiously around. "Come on, let's get inside. Standing out here in broad daylight with all those woods around gives me the creeping jimmies."

IT grew dark as they were eating the meal of canned beans, bacon and coffee. Nina kept getting up and going to the door and looking out toward the spot where they had entered the clearing. She appeared to be listening for something. She was very jumpy.

"Say, gosh," Dunham broke out at last, his mouth full of bread and beans, "it's so all-fired dark now, you can't see anything out there. What's creeping up your back anyway?"

"The feds, fish!" she slapped back at him. "Ever hear of them? They're like barnacles. They stick to your tail, and you have a hell of a time shaking 'em off." She raised her voice a little as she spoke, almost as if she thought somebody might be listening and she wanted whoever it was to hear.

"Aw heck," he reassured her. "There didn't nobody follow us in here." It was almost pitch-dark. He struck a match and reached for an old, misshapen candle stump.

"That's what you think, sap. You're green to the game, I can see. Hey, nix on the glim! No lights—no fire! And light your butts under the table."

Dunham sighed. "What a break. Suppose we hop into that old tub I saw out there and go for a little moonlight row?"

She eyed him coldly. Even though it was almost dark, the green shade was still down over her eyes. "Suppose you heave your duffle bag and shuffle off to the hay?" She jerked her thumb over her shoulder at the rickety stairway that led to the one room above.

Dunham grinned easily. "Now, is that a nice way to treat a brand-new hubby?"

"You'll get in my hair with that line, feller," she warned. "I said you sleep in the hayloft. I camp down here. You're getting your grand."

"Okay, okay," he said hastily, the grin vanishing. "Do I have to go to bed right away?"

"You better scram," she said.

Without a word, he hauled his duffle bag up to his shoulder and climbed the rickety stairs.

"No lights up there!" she called after him.

Dunham's face went suddenly grave as he stepped into the loft and sat on the edge of a creaking bed, whose mattress made a noise like crushing newspaper under his weight. He took off his shoes and dropped them resoundingly on the floor, then, with catlike movements, carefully replaced them on his feet.

He opened the duffle bag and removed some wadded rags. Then, exercising extreme caution in the darkness, he pulled out the parts of a sub-machine gun, assembling them noiselessly with the sure fingers of an expert.

While he was doing this, he could hear the girl piling dishes—with what seemed unnecessary noise — into the iron sink, then the rhythmic sound of the pump handle and the gush of water.

Soon the gun was in working order. He crept forward an inch at a time until he could see through the small opening which served as a window. The moon had risen, and he commanded a fairly good view of the clearing to the rear of the cottage. He squatted as comfortably as possible, eased the muzzle of the gun onto the rotting board which served as a sill, exhibiting the air of one preparing for a long, lonely vigil.

The door below opened and closed. Feet padded softly in the grass at the side of the building. The girl was going around toward the front. In a moment all sounds, save natural night noises, had died away.

Dunham's lips were compressed into a grim line as he stared into the murkiness. Now and then he shifted a trifle,

trying to ease himself into a more comfortable position.

His alert ears caught the faint snap of a twig toward the rear of the building before his eyes could discern the slow-moving shadow. A moment later, the figure of a man loomed in a lighter spot between two trees.

A puzzled frown gripped Dunham's forehead. Unconsciously, he trained the muzzle on the man, then hesitated, watching.

At that instant, a low, feminine cry sounded from the direction of the water at the front of the house. It was followed by the noise of rattling oarlocks, not loud but unmistakable.

Dunham leaped for the stairs, spilling his long legs down at double quick. He pounded through the door and ran around toward the front, Tommy-gun in readiness. His eyes took in the scene at a glance.

The rowboat, which had been tied to the dock, was now about thirty feet offshore. It was operated by the shadowy figure of a man who bent furiously, almost with panic, to the oars. Some large object of human shape bulked at his feet in the bottom of the boat.

Dunham halted, his feet wide apart, and sent a couple of slugs over the oarsman's head. The man stopped rowing and ducked. Then he dipped his oars hastily and started to zigzag.

Dunham aimed carefully and put a slug through his shoulder. The man let out a muffled oath, and one oar splashed clumsily as he dropped it. The other oar dipped jerkily, and the boat began to veer around. It went in a wide circle that brought it close to shore, in the darker shadows of the ice-house.

The oar rested, and Dunham caught the glint of a gun in the good hand of the oarsman. Thinking himself unobserved in the shadow of the ice-house, the man drew a bead on Dunham.

Dunham wasted no time with words. He promptly swung the Tommy-gun, and his jaw went tight as he pumped a couple of slugs into the man's chest. The man coughed and slumped to the bottom of the boat, which drifted gently inshore, nosing softly against the dock.

Dunham leaped forward and recognized the body of the girl, Nina, stirring under the weight of the dead man. He pulled her out, laying her flat on the dock. The eyeshade was gone. He splashed a little water in her face.

She opened her eyes and stared at him dazedly for a moment. Then her arm went feebly up, and she felt gingerly at the side of her head. "Some—somebody threw a coal barge or something at me. What happened?"

Dunham was staring down at her. "You're not Silk Shannon's moll," he accused. "With the eyeshade on, you look enough like her, but without it—"

THE girl struggled to a sitting position, her hand plucking uncomfortably at her skirt. The bottom of the boat hadn't been dry. "W-what do *you* know about Nina Garick?" she demanded shakily.

Dunham's hand plunged into his pocket and re-appeared. There was a little flash of gold in his cupped palm. "Special Agent," he spoke tersely.

She gave a short little laugh. "You!" she cried. "That's one on me. Look." She turned out the waist band of her sodden skirt and showed him a press card.

Dunham spoke disgustedly. "I'll be a son of a gun. I chased all the way down here thinking you were Garick. I knew Silk Shannon had escaped the dragnet, and I figured you were heading in somewhere to meet him. You put on a swell act, but I could choke your damn' neck for getting me way down here on a wild goose chase."

"You put on a pretty good act yourself, you old Tacoma poultry man. But don't be too sure you're chasing geese. Why do you suppose I headed this way so fast, without taking time to make a report?"

"Spill it quick," ordered Dunham.

"I'm Selma Blake. I was working undercover at the Swan Lake joint as a room servant. I managed to listen in on Silk Shannon and the Garick dame, when they got together in her room. It was l

who tipped off the department to raid the place because I knew they planned to lam out in two directions and meet down here. Silk made her memorize the turns to get here. I was hiding in the closet, and memorized the directions, too.

"Then they, in turn, were tipped off on the raid, and that hastened their departure. I saw it coming, so I ducked into the rumble seat compartment of Nina's car. I felt the car start, knew we were getting out of the Swan Lake place fast. There was no way to report, so I just hung on. The car—"

"All right—stick 'em up, G-man," rapped out a voice suddenly from the shadows near the corner of the ice house.

"Silk Shannon," whispered Selma.

Dunham breathed an oath as he slowly obeyed. The Tommy-gun lay at his feet where he had rested it to help Selma up. "The guy at the back of the house," he gritted through clenched teeth. "I could kick myself through a hole in the fence."

"You, too, smart skirt," snapped the voice. A deeper shadow moved in the dim light, and the figure of a man loomed on shore, close to the dock. "I been watching the lay from the woods. You had me fooled, twist, for a couple of minutes until I got a good gander at you. You got meat in the same spots as Garick, but you don't walk like her. Come off that dock!"

As they slowly approached Shannon, Dunham caught sight of the harsh, desperate lines of his face. He was unshaven, and his cheeks had dark hollows. He had them covered with a .38 automatic which nested in his knotted fist as steady as a spike in a log.

"I heard the dame crack something about crashing a ride on Garick's crate. Where's Garick? Talk fast, or—" he snarled the last words.

Selma spoke up. Her voice was amazingly cool, considering the spot they were in. Dunham darted little glances up at the house as she spoke. "I was just telling Hal about how you got tipped off and beat it out of Swan Lake. I was riding in her car. I—"

"I heard you the first time," ripped out Shannon impatiently. "And I remember your moosh, flinging your beef around that joint in a maid's outfit. But I want to know about Garick. What happened?"

"I'm trying to tell you," broke in Selma quietly. "The car is going plenty fast when I hear voices quarreling. One of your men, Silk, had apparently jumped into the car just as she was pulling out. It didn't fit with her plans, as I knew very well, since I'd overheard her tell you she planned a pickup to camouflage. Anyway, she told him he'd have to scram, and he told her he was sticking. The car slowed, then suddenly swerved, throwing me on my ear. It dragged to a stop, and no more voices. But I heard scuffling, then a shot.

"I poked out my head and saw Nina lying over the wheel with a knife in her side."

"Slicer Joe," gritted Shannon; "that's who it was. When I lay my hands on his neck—"

"You won't have to," stated Selma. "He was dead too, a slug in his side. The way I figure it, he knifed her and guided the car to a stop. She wasn't quite out and managed to snake out her artillery and let him have it with her famous left-hand draw. It was the Pick-up Dame's last stand."

"What was the idea of *you* picking me up?" asked Dunham, giving her an encouraging glance. The gun in Shannon's hand had not wavered.

"You keep out of this," rasped Shannon, menacing Dunham with the gun.

"I eased Nina into a nice, soft ditch," went on Selma with a fine show of callousness, "after lifting her artillery and eyeshade. I didn't have a chance to ditch the dead guy. A car came along, so I drove on and dumped him later in a brook in the woods. I figured it'd be nice to make the acquaintance of Silk here."

"You can't talk yourself out of a slug, twist," growled Shannon, "by putting on that kind of an act. You're lying about Garick. Either you gunned her yourself or you—"

"No, it's the truth I'm telling you, Silk," replied Selma in a matter-of-fact

voice. "I knew she was going to pick up some gent for camouflage, and I figured I'd have a better chance of getting acquainted with you if I drove in here looking real natural."

"Anyway, Garick's dead. I figure that much is the truth. She'd never be taken alive," muttered Shannon. "All right. Now I'm gonna trim you two off cold."

"Just a minute," broke in Dunham. "How did the man I just plugged happen to conk this girl and take her for a boat ride. Was he under your orders?"

SHANNON'S voice grated as he replied: "The lousy rats. They all turn when things go black. I post him by the dock and work myself around to the back to check on things. This twist comes around the other side of the house, and he thinks she's Garick. I didn't tip him that I was wise to her. He decides the feds are too hot after me; that to cross me up is safer. He knows she's got a nice roll cached near Montreal for me. So he conks her and starts to lug her over to Canada where he can sweat it out of her. If you wasn't a lousy fed, I'd give you the glad hand instead of a slug in your belly for putting him under the ropes."

As he finished, his finger tightened on the trigger. At the same instant the hum of a powerful motor sounded from behind the house. Shannon cursed, his head jerking up. He held fire while his head cocked in a listening attitude. His eyes did not leave Dunham.

"Swing around, you two," he commanded harshly. "I want to take a gander past the house."

That command was his undoing.

The girl and Dunham obeyed at once. The beam of powerful headlights sent a glow up over the roof of the house. The blinding light suddenly veered and flashed through the shrubbery. Of the three, Shannon was the only one facing that direction. The light flashed past the house and smote him full in the eyes. For a split second he was blinded, off guard.

Dunham, his arms tensed, his weight thrown forward on the balls of his feet, lost no time. He threw himself at Shannon. The gun exploded. Dunham felt the slug plow past his shoulder blade. He drove himself into Shannon's middle.

Shannon landed flat on his back, and the edge of the dock bit into his neck. Dunham forked a big fist around Shannon's exposed throat and forced his head down toward the water.

Shannon swiveled the gun so that it pointed at Dunham's hip. The headlamps were still on them. The car had halted, and its door slammed. Feet came running.

Selma let out a little cry and leaped forward, kicking out at Shannon's gun wrist. The gun exploded again, the slug flying a couple of inches past Dunham's shoulder. Selma immediately flung herself at the gun-wrist, carrying it to the dock and digging a determined knee into it. At the same moment, Shannon's body went limp. Dunham had choked him unconscious.

Dunham got slowly to his feet. "Whew," he said, grinning at Selma, "you're a pal, kid. You and me ought to work together more."

"What about me," asked a voice. "Don't I rate any more, Hal?"

Dunham swung round. "I'll say you do, Pete. You just drove in in time. That old rattletrap flivver of yours must have been hitting smooth for you to keep as close to us as you did. Gimme a pair of bracelets for this bird, Pete."

"Here y'are, Hal."

"You have any trouble following us?" asked Dunham.

"None at all. It worked fine."

"Hey, what is this? How could he follow us? At the rate we were going. And *what* worked fine?"

"A little wrinkle I used," explained Dunham. He stuck his hand in his pocket and showed her a tiny glass vial, about the size of a small medicine capsule. "I dropped one of these out on the road every once in a while, pretending to flick ashes off my butt. It's got a chemical liquid in it that turns to a heavier-than-air gas, but remains inactive for about five minutes after the capsule breaks on

the road. Then, it becomes visible and stains the road a light green. I dropped one every time we slowed for a turn. That's why I was smoking so much all the way down."

The headlights of the parked car shone in Selma's eyes. They sparkled with admiration—and something else. "Gee, Hal, that was clever." Her fingers plucked uncomfortably at her sodden skirt. "If you'll send Pete here to wire a report, I'll take you up on that little invitation to a moonlight row; that is, if I can dig up something to put on in place of this damp rag I borrowed from Nina Garick."

"You bet I'll do that. Pete, you got an old burlap bag maybe in that flivver of yours, to help out a lady?" He turned back to Selma, his face wide with a grin. "It's a good thing you didn't tell Silk you stole his girl friend's skirt and left her in a ditch in her step-ins. He'd have shot you right then and there without asking any more questions."

"When you get to know me better," purred Selma, "you'll realize I got a swell sense of propriety."

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G-Man Friday

By Joe Archibald

Author of "The Morgue the Merrier," "Slay Ride," etc.

Snooty and Scoop are out to round up the rough characters who impolitely murdered Mr. Quagmyre—and they follow a clue of egg-stain instead of blood-stain.

IT is very dishonest to snatch a citizen as if he is only a handbag. But that is just what happened to a very corpulent and respected citizen of Beantown one time when the crime wave in the Hub seemed quite dried up by the bobbies of the Burg of Beans and Bluebloods.

The spouse of the snatch victim is in quite a dither when me and Snooty Piper and the other boys of the journals call to get a gander at the ransom note. Mrs. J. Quigley Quagmyre is wearing a negligée that must have set back the kidnaped taxpayer a very pretty lump of sugar, and there are enough sparkling rocks on her fingers to finance a world's fair.

Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy is sitting on the divan with the old girl. He is prom-

ising her that he will have all the snatching citizens in the jug and indicted before the last editions. Iron Jaw is on the books at headquarters as a detective, but he could not track down a hippo in a fenced-in one-acre lot.

"Take it easy," he says to the very hysterical social lioness. "I will be in hiding when the dough is turned over to the crooks, and I will nab them."

"How do you know there is a warehouse handy to the trysting place?" Snooty inquires. "Are you in with the dishonest citizens?"

"You shut up, Piper!" the big flatfoot howls. "Mrs. Quagmyre, if you want me to clear the room—"

"Maybe all you gentlemen have forgotten," Mrs. Quagmyre sniffs after a very piercing squeal of hysteria, "it is my husband. He has been kidnaped. He has not just left town. Call the G-men this instant! Call somebody!"

"Why, what a coincidence," Snooty says to the swell dame, and he is just going to reach for that badge he carries in the pocket of his green suit when I kick him soundly in the shins.

"You crackpot," I growl at him.

"Uh—er—well, Iron Jaw," Snooty says, "I must read the ransom note again so the public will know the details. They are not psychic, you know. Ha ha!"

"But don't you dare to steal it, you gartersnake!" Iron Jaw growls.

Snooty picks it off the table with the big detective glowering at him. It has been written in pencil, and the big envelope in which it was delivered contains some cards belonging to Mr. Quagmyre, so that his frau will be quite sure that the right taxpayer has been taken out of circulation.

"It is the real McCoy they have got," Snooty says.

"Quagmyre is the name," Iron Jaw snarls. "There, Mrs. Quagmyre, is a sample of what we have writing for the newspapers. They do not remember even who—"

Snooty groans: "Iron Jaw, if you had four more brain cells, you would be two grades lower than a moron."

I peek over Snooty's shoulder at the letter written by the rough characters:

> We have got your husband. He is yours for fifty thousand bucks if you want him back. Bring in the bulls on this and we will snuff him out like a light, see? Bring the dough on Monday night to the old cider mill three miles west of Bolton—and have it in one-hundred-dollar and five-hundred-dollar bills. If there are marks on the dough, Quagmyre will be rubbed out like a pencil mark. A guy will be there to meet you at eleven-thirty. Watch your step.
>
> You Would Like to Know Who!

"SO you will accompany the citizen who delivers the sugar, huh?" Snooty says to the flatfoot. "Iron Jaw, you would use a stuffed cat to decoy mice. You would make more noise with your overgrown puppies than a steamroller, even if you were walking through moss. Mrs. Quagmyre, I am very glad to be of service as I will carry the fifty thousand."

"You screwball!" I whisper in a very weak voice.

Iron Jaw calls Snooty much worse, and Mrs. Quagmyre clamps her hands over her ears and tells Iron Jaw after he is through baying that she will have him arrested for disturbing the peace with such vile language.

"I do not see what is wrong with my suggestion," Snooty bridles. "Here I agree to risk life and limb—"

"Why—er—I'm very sorry," Iron Jaw says, "but that is right, ain't it? Piper, I apologize. You are the very person who should deliver the dough. They are liable to kill you, ain't they?"

"Ha ha," I laughs, nasty. "It is a very good guess, Iron Jaw."

Mrs. Quagmyre says Snooty Piper is a very brave man and she thanks him and says a Mr. Screed will have the fifty thousand ready by Monday noon as Mr. Screed is Mr. Quagmyre's right-hand man and is the only citizen who has her husband's power of attorney.

"All I have in the house," she sobs, "is eleven thousand, and that is just for ordinary expenses."

"I don't see how you manage to scrimp along on that," Snooty says sympathetically. "What with prices of things up like they are, and all. Well, Iron Jaw, I want no police interference here, as you know what the rough citizens said they would do to Mr. Quagmyre if you showed your mugs anywhere near the old mill. You understand I am the go-between—and you keep your big yap sewed up."

"Well, it is an ill wind that don't gather no moss," Iron Jaw trumpets. "Ha ha, I hope Mr. Guppy will be generous with your folks. Funerals ain't cheap no more. Come on, boys, we know where we ain't wanted."

"Scoop," Snooty says on the way out, "you will go with me and Mr. Screed, as the rough boys would not want to have to shoot three times because that might attract too much attention. If I went alone, one shot might sound like a blowout somewhere. It is very smart figuring, huh?"

"I will not be caught dead with you, Snooty Piper!" I vociferate very determinedly. "I am washing my hands of the whole affair. The dishonest characters who lifted Mr. Quagmyre right off the public highway would not stop at murder, Snooty. I would not be surprised at all if they dismembered you."

"I am not daunted, Scoop Binney," the crackpot chirps. "I will deliver the sugar and keep my eyes open."

"A cannon may shut them quite permanently," I concluded. "Good morning, Mr. Piper. I will see you in a fortnight—maybe."

IT is the next noon that I join Snooty Piper. We go to Mr. Quagmyre's office, which is in a building on Milk Street, and there is Mr. Junius Screed waiting for us. Junius is a very long-faced gink with a pair of ears that are quite like jib sails. Just as we walk in he is talking on the telephone, and he wants to know which goat took the fifth at Narragansett. He does not seem to like the answer he gets.

"Hello," Snooty gurgles. "We are here to inquire if you got the fifty thousand."

"Huh? Oh, yes—to be sure," Screed chirps and takes an envelope out of the drawer of his desk. "You are Mr. Piper and Mr. Binney?"

"I'm afraid so," I says. "Nobody else could be so screwy."

"Tonight we will free Mr. Quagmyre," Junius says, and he wipes at his lamps with a hanky. "It is an outrage—stealing a man like Mr. Quagmyre! He's the salt of the earth, a gentleman of the old school. Why, he would give anybody the shirt off his back. Once I was at his house when the butler came in and told him that there was a hungry and ragged man at the back door, and Mr. Quagmyre said to feed him and give him three suits of his clothes." Mr. Screed is quite teary about the eulogy of Mr. Quagmyre, and it seems to touch even Snooty Piper who is as hard-shelled as a mud-turtle.

"Yes, gentlemen, the hungry man asked for ham and eggs, and Mr. Quagmyre had the butler order a case of eggs—and him a man who abhorred the sight of an egg in the house! That is the kind of a man Mr. Quagmyre is, gentlemen. Oh, we must not fail to deliver the ransom money tonight."

"Check!" says Snooty briskly. "If we do, Mr. Quagmyre will be taking lessons on the harp by morning. Mr. Binney and I will be here at the stroke of ten."

"At twelve," I says to him, "I will know for sure what all the clergy are guessing at, I am sure. I hope you win the sixth race, Mr. Screed."

It is very much darker than usual that night as me and Snooty and Mr. Screed roll over the highway in the direction of the hick town called Bolton, and it seems only three minutes before we are getting out of Mr. Quagmyre's big, sixteen-lunged boiler just across the road from the old mill. There is a brook to cross before we get there, and Mr. Screed leads the way. Snooty Piper pauses when we are on the other side of the rill and tips his green hat back on his noggin and scratches his scalp as if something puzzles him.

"Well, did another brain cell collapse?" I toss out.

"Huh—ha, I was thinkin' of somethin' funny," he chortles.

"You would die laughin' in a charnel house, wouldn't you?" I says. "Mr. Screed, let's hurry and get this over with before my arteries freeze up."

We walk up the bank and got only a hundred yards when somebody tells us to stop and reach up to see if we can't get ourselves a handful of very pretty stars. It is not elves who are speaking, either.

"Make a move, you mugs, an' we'll cut ya in two at the necks!" a rough boy with a mask on says. There are two other dishonest characters with him, and their pans are bundled up too. "Where's the sugar?"

"R-right here," Mr. Screed stutters. "In my pockets. Can we have Mr. Quagmyre tonight?"

"Ya'll git him when we say so," the rough boy rips out, and he reaches into Mr. Screed's pockets and takes the fifty grand. Another tough guy has a flashlight ready, and the rough citizens each take a gander at the legal tender.

"Looks okay, yeah. Well, I giss that's the woiks. Awright, you Santy Clauses, in about five hours ya git the cops an' ya'll find Mr. Quagmyre all comfy on the floor of the mill. We'll be in Montreal when ya untie the big shot, ha!"

"Maybe we'll follow you," Snooty suggests. "What's to stop us?"

"Oh-h-h-h," I groan, "is that a thing to say, Snooty Piper?"

The nastiest laugh I ever heard comes out of the kissers of the criminal characters. "Turn around, you smart guys," one says.

We do, and that is all we remember until the roosters start crowing. I am quite sure it was a tree trunk that hit me.

"W-well, Snooty," I says when my brains get unscrambled, "it was quite an answer you got, ha ha!"

"They are cowards," Snooty gulps. "They would not dare to fight face to face. Uh—er—have you got an aspirin, Mr. Screed?"

Mr. Quagmyre's right-hand man is rubbing his scalp, too, and he is very indignant about Snooty having aggravated the lawless citizens. He puts on his derby, but Snooty's green hat won't fit over the bump on his noggin and he has to carry it in his hand.

"The birds are out early, ain't they?" Snooty says next. "Hear them sing!"

"It is bees I hear," Junius says. "Well, it will be safe now to get to the nearest phone and call up the police, won't it?"

"I am sure Mr. Quagmyre will be pleased if we hurry," I says. "Did you get any idea as to the identity of the rough boys? I am sure of the one who hit me."

"Who?" Snooty asks, eyes very much agog.

"Joe Louis, Mr. Piper. Have him arrested at once."

"This is no time to joke," Mr. Screed says. "It is a phone we want the most."

A MILE and a half away we find one in a peasant's house and Snooty Piper calls for Iron Jaw and a squad of gendarmes to come out and make Mr. Quagmyre's rescue legal. Then we go out on the porch of the farmhouse and wait. Snooty Piper's dome is swelled all out of shape by the time the representatives of law and order roll up in a couple of police jaloupis.

Iron Jaw indulges in a very loud outburst of mirth when he sees Snooty Piper's noggin. "Haw haw," he brays, "the poultry have been layin' eggs on your dome. You should move out of their way, Piper. What did the rough boys hit you with?"

Snooty ignores Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy and leads Mr. Screed to one of the boilers. "Let's go and get Mr. Quagmyre. And don't you arrest him for kidnaping himself; will you, Iron Jaw?"

It is not far to the old cider mill. When we file into the place I see something that is not pretty like a tulip bed. Mr. J. Quigley Quagmyre is on the floor tied up like Scollay Square traffic, and there is adhesive tape all over the rich citizen's mouth; not that he minds very much, as when we get a close squint at the

TDA

snatched taxpayer, we find he has been rendered quite as defunct as a mackerel on ice. A lead pill has been inserted in his scalp where it would do the least good.

"This is awful," Iron Jaw says. "They went and rubbed him out."

"No," Snooty says, "they rubbed him out and then went, ha ha."

"I do not see anything funny about this, Snooty Piper," I says. "Have you got no sensibilities whatsoever?"

Snooty is very callous, to say the least, and he stoops down and takes a note off the corpse. He reads it out loud:

"Too bad. Mr. Quagmyre got a gander at one of our pans when a mask slipped. You can't git no worst for murder than kidnapin', so we give the big boy the well-known works. Try an' find out who done it!"

Mr. Screed is very put out about it all and swears he will get the monsters who committed the foul deed if it takes him across the whole world. Mr. Screed can hardly look at the remains, but he identifies the body to the gendarmes after a look or two and then slumps down on an old keg and holds his dome in his hands.

It is Iron Jaw who bellows something about a find that will put certain citizens in the hot squat. He has picked up a letter that one of the tough citizens lost and forgot to mail, and he finds it in a very dark corner of the old mill.

"Ha ha," Iron Jaw hoots, "they always slip up somewhere. I will go to this address and I will park there until I sweat the name of the writer of this letter out of the guy who sent it. Well, Piper, this is one time I got a case sewed up."

Snooty does not hear Iron Jaw trumpeting. He is kneeling down beside the corpse, and his face is as white as a cherub's soul. "Uh—er—it is the big citizen all right. His name is on the label of his swanky suit. We will have to break the news to his wife. Mr. Screed, what undertaker do the Quagmyre's take from?"

"Well, I will not go with you, gentlemen," Iron Jaw gloats. "I have a place to go by myself. Don't try to follow me either, Piper!"

SNOOTY breaks the word to Mrs. Quagmyre when we get back to the town of beans and pork. I wait outside the spiffy tepee until he comes out of it. The crackpot says the dame is very broken up and does not wish to view the deceased until she pulls herself together. Mr. Screed has gone to his hotel to grieve, and Snooty suggests that we take a hack to the Greek's where we can do our thinking.

"I do not see any use in wasting gray matter," I argue. "Mr. Quagmyre is out of circulation. The dishonest boys have the fifty grand, and by this time should be hiring an Indian guide near Hudson Bay. There are no clues except the one Iron Jaw dug up, so just let us wait until the big slewfoot makes a pinch. It is all quite clear, isn't it?"

"There is one trouble with you, Scoop," Snooty says when we get to the Greek's grog shop; "you are not very observing, to say the least. You have a memory no longer than a phonograph needle. I wonder what Iron Jaw found in the old mill?"

"I think the big oaf has got something there," I says as I pick up a discarded copy of Mr. Guppy's *Evening Star*. "Iron Jaw is due for a break just as much as a skater who keeps on jumping over a row of barrels. Say, look, Snooty!"

The crackpot does not pay much attention to me at first when I read a very interesting article of news about Abigail Hepplethwaite. Abigail is quite an eccentric old doll who lives in Back Bay, and she is as well-heeled with lucre as a whale is with blubber.

"Abigail has gone in for sponsoring spiritualists," I says. "Ha ha, what will she do next—join a voodoo colony? Snooty, it says here that Abigail held a séance at her shack last night, and who was in charge of the spook rodeo but the great Madame Beri-Beri!"

"Huh?" Snooty mumbles and looks at the clock. "I hope Mrs. Quagmyre phones me before much longer."

"What would she want with you?" I asks and yawn very earnestly. "Well, I suppose you remember we had no sleep last evening, Mr. Piper."

"Mrs. Quagmyre is going to call me as soon as she hears from her husband," Snooty says.

I choke on my lager and feel my scalp lift up like a Sioux Indian had it in a death grip. "He—he's dead, you nitwit," I gulp. "Snooty, that thump on the conk did you no good. You just wait here and I will call a conveyance of some kind."

"Scoop," Snooty says, "I do not believe you saw the egg stains on the vest of the corpse, did you? Now you seem to have forgotten that Mr. Screed told us about Mr. Quagmyre's aversion to the fruit of the fowl. I will admit that John Doe looked like Mr. Quagmyre, and that he wore one of the rich boy's well-tailored suits, but you will also remember that Mr. Quagmyre had a heart of gold, too, as well as a walletful, and would give a citizen in want not only the shirt off his back but—"

"Uh—er—you mean that the rough characters snatched the wrong taxpayer?" I gasp. "A citizen who looked very much like Mr. Quag?"

"That is how it looks to me and Mrs. Quagmyre," Snooty says. "I am expecting a call from the dame, as she told me that her breadwinner went fishing in quite a remote spot in New England on the day of the kidnaping. Mr. Quagmyre was fed up with big business for awhile and got away from it all unbeknownst to everyone but his spouse and Mr. Screed. He left instructions to the effect that no one was to communicate with him in any way, as he wished to completely lose himself for several days like a vice president. Now I imagine that Mr. Quagmyre will get the Beantown papers, three days late, where he is at, Scoop, and maybe is just finding out now that he has been kidnaped by criminal characters, ha ha."

My dome feels full of butterflies. I says: "The dame seems to confide in you a lot, Mr. Piper. Why?"

"I showed her my G-man's badge," Snooty says airily. I pick up an empty bottle, but the Greek grabs me just as I obey a very homicidal impulse.

"Let me go," I insist. "I'll gladly pay the extreme penalty for mashing his noggin."

Snooty jumps up then as the Greek's phone is ringing. He gets into the booth and stays there for five minutes by the clock. When he comes out he is excited.

"Scoop, we must go to see Mrs. Quagmyre. My deductions are quite correct, any way you look at them."

"You mean that Mr. Quag—"

"Don't say it," Snooty interrupts me threateningly.

HALF an hour later we are looking into the dead pan of the Quagmyre butler, and Snooty shoves the G-man's badge right in front of his bugle and says:

"Shake your puppies, Dracula, as it is U. S. Government business."

"Show the gentleman in, Chitling," we hear the missus warble, and Snooty pushes the buttling citizen out of the way like he was a cornstalk and walks into the drawing-room.

The rich doll is very elated as she waves a telegram at us. Snooty takes it and reads it while I peek over his shoulder.

JUST READ THE PAPERS STOP SOMETHING COCKEYED STOP ARRIVE NORTH STATION TEN P M WHACKY

"You G-men are priceless," Mrs. Quagmyre chirps. "How do you do it? Why your friend looks quite ill, Mr. Piper. Can I get him something?"

"Arsenic," I says. "Ha ha, could I just sit down for a second or three?"

"I hope that no one knows about this telegram besides us," Snooty says to her. "I don't want even Mr. Screed to know a thing about it. The public and the rough characters of the underworld must be allowed to think that Mr. Quagmyre is really horizontal for keeps. I'd suggest that you contact the funeral parlors and give orders that the mahogany kimono containing the remains be tabu to sightseers."

"I'll do everything you say, Mr. Piper," the dame says. "But don't you

think the Western Union might have read the wire?"

"Ha ha," I says, "answer that one, Philo Chan!"

"Mr. Quagmyre did not commit himself in any way," Snooty says. "I imagine the name he signed was a pet one, Mrs. Quagmyre?"

The old doll titters a bit and admits it is. "Uh huh," she says coyly. "He never did grow up. But what'll we do next?"

"I will talk that over with you alone," Snotty says. "If my man Friday here will leave the room, ha ha. You see, Mrs. Quagmyre, us G-men don't even trust each other at times. Scoop, if you don't mind—"

It is an expensive vase I pick up, but I don't throw it, as the dame squeals and says it is a Ming and cost three hundred dollars.

"You wait, Snooty Piper, until I get into a cheaper neighborhood," I yowl. "I will rid the community of you, you—"

I sit in a room that has more books in it than Carnegie ever endowed four libraries with, and start grinding my teeth. After a time, Snooty calls me out, and I follow him into the street and into a swindle bus.

"Don't talk to me," I says. "I am liable to attack you any moment."

"It is very plain all around, isn't it?" Snooty says, anyway. "The lawless boys snatched John Doe, who was wearing a gift suit from Mr. Quagmyre. Mr. Q. had forgotten to remove some cards, letters, et cetera from his pockets, and the rough citizens no doubt laughed when John Doe argued that a mistake had been made. John Doe could not argue very much, though, as they plastered quite a supply of adhesive tape over his mouth. Now the late John Doe resembled Mr. Quagmyre to a surprising degree, Scoop, and Mr. Screed took just one look at the defunct citizen and identified him —as you remember. Now, only you and I and Mrs. Quagmyre are aware of the fact that the real Mr. J. Quigley Quagmyre is breathing and eating quite as regular as ever, but we must get to him the moment he steps off the iron horse this evening."

"Why?" I ask. "Give me one reason, Snooty Piper."

"Now, John Doe was rubbed out," Snooty says, "and the State does not brook such lawbreaking, does it? And we must apprehend the rough citizens who got fifty thousand of Mr. Quagmyre's pin money, to protect other important taxpayers."

"I suppose Mr. Screed murdered him, Snooty Piper," I scoff. "He was with us all the time, as you remember."

"Everybody is quite guilty in a murder," Snooty says, "unless a good lawyer can prove he isn't."

I am too tired to argue with the crackpot any longer. I wonder if Iron Jaw has made an arrest just before I go to sleep in front of the Greek's.

AT ten o'clock me and Snooty Piper manage to spot Mr. J. Quigley Quagmyre getting off a rattler and Snooty slides up to him fast and shoves that G-man's badge under the big boy's schnozzle.

"Don't say anythin'," he mutters. "Just draw your hat down over your eyes and follow us to a hack. It is the U. S. taking care of you."

It is on the way to the Quagmyre mansion that Snooty tells the very dumbfounded Mr. Quagmyre that he does not know it but he is in a funeral parlor being well-preserved for a trip across the Styx.

"You should keep on giving expensive suits away," Snooty goes on. "If you had not been so kind-hearted, you would be under glass right now, instead of John Doe."

"That was a very narrow escape, wasn't it boys?" the dough boy says and wipes worry dew from his scalp.

"It will do until a worse one comes along," I says. "Well, Snooty, what'll you do next, you great big man-tracker, you!"

"We will get Mr. Quagmyre here out of the cab four or five blocks from his little cottage," Snotty says, "and walk the rest of the way. Mr. Quagmyre, when you get home, you must stay in hiding

until you hear from me. Don't even let Mr. Screed know you are home. Mrs. Quagmyre fired Chitling this P. M. I hope that is quite clear."

The old boy nods his dome, but I know it feels just like mine, which seems to be filled with sparrows building nests. We get out of the hack in front of a drug store and walk the rest of the way. We push the well-to-do taxpayer in through his own back door and then call for Mrs. Q. Snooty does not wait to watch the touching reunion, but drags me out fast and heads for the nearest subway.

"Well, Scoop," he says, "lay low until you hear from me. I will not need you further this evening. I have two more calls to make. Goodnight, Mr. Binney."

"If you break anything," I toss after the fathead, "be sure it's not below the neck. I think you are screwy."

I read the journals before I hit the alfalfa quite late that night, and I find out that last rites will be performed for Mr. Quagmyre on the morrow. Only close friends will be at the exclusive send-off for the corpse. I fall asleep and dream that I am getting free board and room in a big house on a hill in Danvers. It is where the state keeps citizens who insist on buying tickets to Waterloo. . . .

It is just twelve hours later when I am in the *Evening Star* office, trying to explain my absence to Dogface Woolsey, the city editor, that a messenger boy comes in and hands me a very expensive-looking envelope. It has Abigail Hepplethwaite's address on the back of it. I rip the missive open, and what is it but a hastily scrawled summons from the old girl.

The note says I am cordially invited to attend a very impromptu séance at Abigail's tepee that very evening and to keep my mouth closed about it. Dogface wants to know what I am reading, but I just put my hat on my noggin and go toward the elevator like a sleepwalker.

"You are fired!" Dogface hollers after me as I enter the lift. "Tell Piper the same thing."

I will never forget the gathering at Abigail's that evening at nine o'clock. Snooty Piper is there with Mr. Screed. There are one or two other citizens whom I don't recognize in the dark. A crystal ball is on the table, and a bony-panned old doll is standing in front of it. She is dressed up like something that would feel quite at home in a tomb.

"What's the idea, you crackpot?" I snarl at Snooty as I sit down.

"Close your trap, Binney," Abigail snaps. "This is no Keystone Comedy picture."

"You're tellin' me?" I grunt and try to stop my hair from shooting out. Then Madame Beri-Beri starts chanting and says we are all gathered to find out who rubbed out Mr. Quagmyre and that she will coax the deceased right out of the grave.

"Ha ha," I laughs, "what fun, huh Snooty?" Abigail whangs me with a lorgnette that would crack open a packing case with one wallop, and I do not come to until I see Mr. Quagmyre walking right out through a curtain, and he has a bullet hole between his eyes. He is dressed up in a soup-and-fish like they buried John Doe in. His map is the color of a clay pipe, and his eyes look like poached eggs swimming in cranberry juice.

"Tell them, John Quigley Quagmyre," the medium intones. "Tell them who sent you to the grave."

"I am leavin'," I whisper in a hollow voice. "This is too good an act to—"

"Shut up," Snooty whispers. "It is ready for the payoff. Look!"

Just then Mr. Junius Screed lets out a very piercing squall of apprehension. "Don't look at me like that, Mr. Quagmyre," he yips. "Yes, it was I who had you kidnaped, but I didn't kill you. Go away! Go— Awk! I will tell all. Get the p-p-police. I—er—ugh—ugh—"

Abigail switches on the glimmers and says to two big, burly gendarmes to do their duty. Mr. Quagmyre shakes hands all around and says he thinks he will go on the stage.

"Well, Scoop," Snooty says, "how are all your folks? Won't Mr. Guppy be pleased?"

IT is quite a time I have getting my pump back into place, and my hair is still standing up like the fur on the back of a very nettled tomcat.

"Uh—er—congratulations, S-Snooty," I stutter. "Have you g-got some s-smelling s-salts, Ab — er — Miss Hepplethwaite?"

"He scares easy, don't he, Piper?" Abigail sniffs.

Mr. Screed comes to after a time and confesses that he hired a couple of very dishonest characters by the names of Gippo the Leech and Loose Lip Luigi to snatch Mr. Quagmyre, and that he had intended to split the fifty G's with them. Mr. Screed had no idea that the tough boys would do a bump-off.

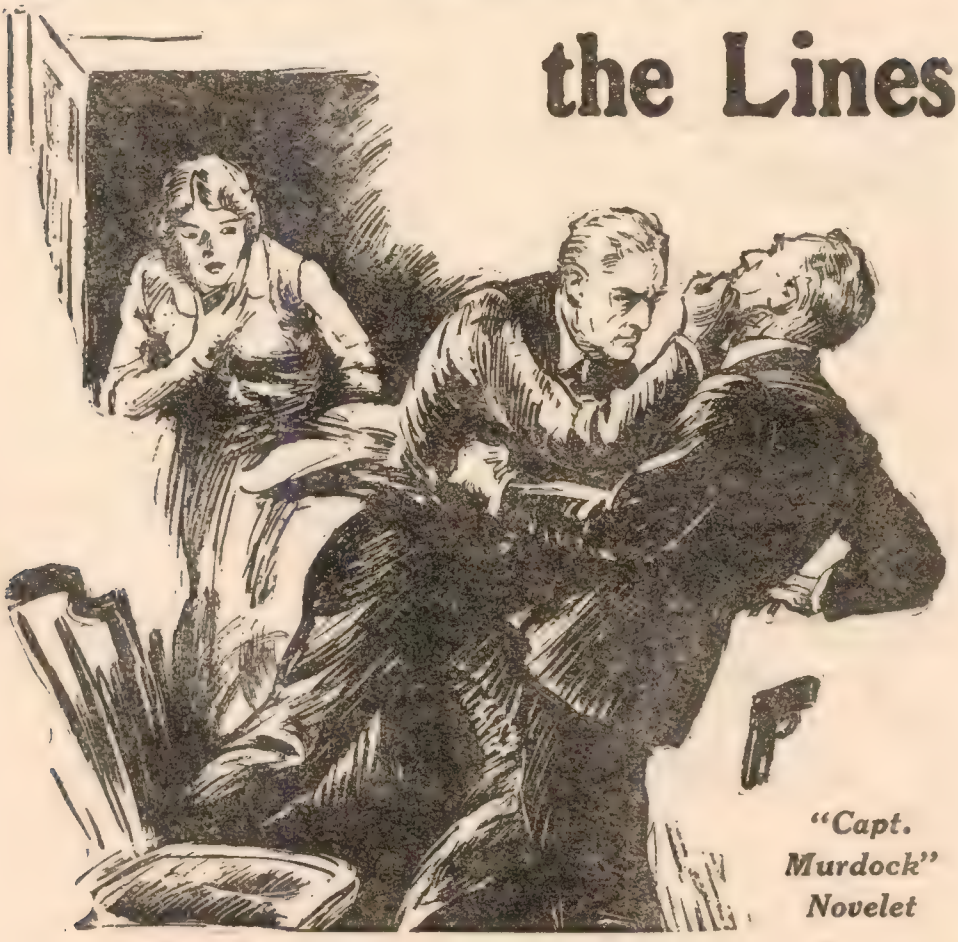
"I was suspicious of Mr. Screed the night we carried the money to the snatchers," Snooty says. "He knew just where to cross the brook without getting his feet wet, ha ha. Well, has anybody heard from Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy?"

A flatfoot laughs. "You never saw a madder guy, boys," he chuckles. "That letter that O'Shaughnessy picked up in the old mill was one he dropped himself. He'd been carryin' it for a week, and it was written by his wife's sister to a boy friend she had in Stoneham. He almost broke the innocent citizen's skull makin' him come clean. We don't know what to do about O'Shaughnessy."

"Just leave that to Mrs. O'Shaughnessy," Snooty advised the cop. "It will be quite enough, I assure you. Come on, Scoop!"

I am past speech as I trundle after him. The last thing I hear is Abigail chuckling over Iron Jaw's plight. It is quite a sense of humor the old girl has.

Murder Between the Lines



"Capt. Murdock" Novelet

By Carl McK. Saunders

Author of "Death for Sale," "Alibi Bait," etc.

Captain John Murdock had to disguise himself to play a role in a drama he did not understand. But he knew that Gloria West was in danger, and that he must take the part of the corpse-to-be on a one-way ride.

CAPTAIN JOHN MURDOCK looked at his image in the mirror. The skin of his face was tinged with a sickly yellowish color, mottled here and there by faint brown spots. A two day's growth of whiskers covered his jaw. The scar over his left eye had been painted out, and thinned eyebrows, widely separated, made his eyes seem far apart. His hair was cut short and was of a shade midway between dark brown and red, and with his lips pushed out a little from his teeth by a fold of wax,

he looked quite repulsive. Hunching his shoulders a little improved the effect.

There was a knock on his door, and turning, he said, sharply: "Who is it?"

"Bert Andrews," came the answer.

He crossed over to the door, opened it, and said to the tall, thin man who entered: "Well, how do you like it?"

Andrews looked at him critically, shook his head. "It wouldn't fool me, chief. Why don't you forget it?"

"What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing. It's a damn good job. It just wouldn't fool me, that's all. An' if it wouldn't fool me, it might not fool some one else."

Murdock shrugged. "That's somethin' I've got to risk. Is Scabo outside?"

"Yeah. He's in the car with Spence."

The detective looked at his watch. It was eleven-thirty. He walked over to the bureau, pulled open a drawer, took out two guns and swiftly examined them. Then one of the guns he slipped into a shoulder-holster and the other he dropped into the pocket of the suit he was wearing. An extra handful of cartridges followed. The suit he had on was a dark serge of good quality but it was wrinkled and spotted, and his shirt was dirty at the collar and mussed.

"Scabo know what he's to do?" Murdock asked.

"Sure. I told him."

"How did he take it?"

"Well, he took it, chief. But somethin' tells me he didn't like it. There's a difference between stoolin' an' what we're makin' him do."

John Murdock grunted and crossed over to the door. He said: "I'll go out the back way, Bert. Be sure you're clear, that no one's watchin'. Pick me up in the alley."

Andrews agreed, left the room and walked toward the front stairs. After he was gone, John Murdock clicked off the lights in his room, locked the door and put the key under the hall rug several paces down the hall. Then he went down the back way, out a back door and into the shadows of the alley. There he waited for fifteen minutes until a car crawled down the alley and passed the niche where he was waiting. He stepped out after it was gone, caught it, opened the door and pulled himself inside.

Jimmie Spence was sitting in the back seat beside the dwarfed, cringing figure of "Warty" Scabo. Scabo's face was in the shadows. He was sniffing as though he had a cold.

"Hi, chief," Spence greeted Murdock, his voice a little anxious and strained.

Murdock grinned in the darkness. "Snap out of it, Jimmy," he advised. Then he turned to Scabo. "Know what you're supposed to do?"

"Y-yes, sir," Scabo quavered.

"Hidden in the darkness across from Mother Gessler's place there'll be two guns trained on you all the time, Scabo," Murdock continued. "Townsend's behind one of those guns, an' Sam Gluba's behind the other. They both know how to shoot, an' at a signal from me they'll both blast you. But you know that, don't you."

Warty Scabo wriggled in his seat. "I—I'll do what you want," he stammered.

The detective laughed. "You better. Death's a mighty permanent thing. They don't issue paroles in hell. Just remember that."

The car, equipped with the license plates of a stolen machine recovered by the police a few hours before, swung through the lower part of central city to the edge of a rooming-house section. From the front seat, Andrews said: "We're almost there, chief. Good luck."

John Murdock grunted and he felt the muscles of his body tighten convulsively. Andrews sped up the car, swung in suddenly to the curb and stopped. Murdock opened the door. He tumbled out, and Scabo followed him. The car wheeled away at once. Looking across the sidewalk, Murdock saw a very tall, dilapidated frame building. In the daytime one could have read an old sign in one of the dirty front windows which said *Rooms for Rent.*

He looked nervously around. Across the street, somewhere, Townsend and Gluba were watching.

"Come on, Scabo," he ordered, his voice low and rasping. "Where's the place?"

Scabo shot a frightened look at him, then scurried across the sidewalk and around the front steps to a semi-basement door. He rang the bell three times, waited a moment, and then rang it again, lightly. He was trembling.

FOOTSTEPS sounded down an uncarpeted hallway, and in another moment the door was opened by a tall, sharp-featured woman with stringy, unkempt hair and a very red face. There was a dim light in the hall behind her.

"Well, who is it?" she demanded.

"It—it's me—Scabo," quavered the man. "I—got a pal wid me. He just lammed in from L.A. He wants a room fer a while."

"Yeah? Well why bring him here? I ain't got no rooms. Beat it." The woman started to close the door, but Murdock pushed forward.

"Listen here," he said, huskily. "I gotta have a place to lay up fer a while. I gotta meet a guy here in a couple o' days, but I can't go to none o' the regular joints, see?"

"What's your name?" demanded the woman.

"He's Duke Rath," Scabo said.

Murdock turned on Scabo, snarled a curse. "I told you to ferget dat name, an' I mean it, see. Ferget it."

Scabo cringed away, and Murdock turned back to the woman. "Whut's de price?" he asked.

"One hundred dollars a day, an' if I find out you're hot, out you go."

The detective sniffed, wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. "Dat's steep," he grumbled.

"Well, I didn't ask you to come here," snapped the woman. She made as though to close the door.

"Wait. Dat's all right," Murdock agreed.

"In advance," the woman insisted.

The detective shrugged. He pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket, peeled off five twenties, held them out to the woman. Her clawlike hand grabbed for them and she said, ungraciously: "Come on in."

"T'anks, pal," Murdock mumbled to Scabo. He saw Scabo turn and scurry away, and he knew that before he had gone many yards Townsend and Gluba would close in on him and put him where he couldn't talk for the next few days. From that angle he was safe.

Following the woman down the dimly lighted hallway he was led up a flight of stairs and to a door on the floor above. The woman opened the door, clicked on a light. Murdock entered. The room was poorly furnished. There was an old bed in one corner covered by dirty blankets.

"Here's your room," said the woman. "The bathroom's two doors on down the hall on this side."

The detective nodded. "What about my meals."

"You eat here, three times a day. If you want anything, push that button by the door. Goodnight." She went out and closed the door after her.

Murdock looked around the room, hiding the elation he felt behind an ugly scowl. It was a miserable room and the tariff of a hundred dollars a day was plenty steep. But at least he was here. Scabo's introduction had worked, and his own disguise had passed first inspection. There was nothing to do now but wait.

He left his door unlocked, switched off the lights and lay down on the bed. It creaked under him every time he shifted his body, but he didn't mind that. Staring up at the ceiling, he reviewed swiftly the chain of circumstances which had brought him here.

GLORIA WEST. In his mind's eye he could see her now as plainly as he had seen her three weeks ago, when he had said good night late one evening in the President Hotel. Tall, slender, dark, she still looked younger and more attractive than most women of his acquaintance. Once, in the past, he had thought himself in love with her, but he had put that love aside. Her family were of the élite of the city. He had been just a cop. But a dozen years had passed, and neither of them had married. Most of that time

Gloria had been away from Central City. It was only a month ago that she had returned.

It was trouble that had brought her back. Trouble not of her own making, but that trouble had brought her into contact with some of the most dangerous figures of the underworld. She had laughed over his fears for her, scoffed at them. But suddenly, without any explanation at all, she had dropped out of sight.

Her disappearance had made him almost frantic. For a week he hardly slept or took the time to eat. Then, as suddenly as she had disappeared, he heard from her by telephone.

"Don't worry about me, John," she had said to him. "I'm all right. No, I went away of my own free will, and as soon as I can I will come back. Quit searching for me, or what I have to do may take longer —might even prove impossible."

"You—you are here in the city?" he had demanded.

"Yes, John."

"What's happened? What's it all about?"

"I can't tell you that, right now, but you will hear from me again."

Then she had hung up. When he traced the call, he discovered that it had come from a free phone in a grocery. He didn't stop his search, however. But he might as well have stopped it, for he made no progress.

Three days ago, then, he had heard from her again, this time by note. That note he knew almost by heart. The handwriting was unmistakably hers. It had read, in part:

You can help me, John. I thought that I would be able to do this alone, but I can't. On Tuesday night of next week a man named Tony Welch is coming to Central City to see some one. Welch is well known to the New York police, but he has been able to keep out of their hands. He's a clever man, John, and a dangerous man. Just whom he is coming here to meet I don't know, but the place of the meeting is known as Mother Gessler's. If you have an undercover man who could get into that place, have him there Tuesday night, and let me know his name by signing it to a want ad in the Daily News, a want ad advertising three steel desks for sale. This may prove to be a dangerous assignment, so be sure of your man. On the other hand, nothing may happen at all.

I know, John, that this may sound very mysterious and strange, but I can't risk coming to see you and I can't explain everything in this note. If you will only trust me . . . .

There had been more to the letter, references to things that would have settled the identity of the author in his mind if he had been at all inclined to doubt Gloria West had written it.

He had inserted an ad in the paper signed Rath, and had his men pick up Warty Scabo. Scabo, he knew, could get him into Mother Gessler's if anyone could. And it had worked. He was even a day early.

THE night passed slowly. At times the detective dozed but his sleep was light and the least noise would have awakened him.

When the sun came up, he arose, walked down the hall to the bathroom, washed his face and hands and examined his appearance in the mirror. The stain on his face wouldn't come off without the aid of chemicals. Even in the light of day he felt that he had a good chance to escape detection, unless he bumped into some one who knew him very well.

At eight o'clock, the woman known as Mother Gessler brought his breakfast. She carried it into his room on a greasy tray, flopped it on the table and started out.

"I wanna see a paper," he growled at her.

She paused and her eyes narrowed. "Papers cost a buck."

"To hell with that," he grated. "I wanna see a paper, an' I ain't got no buck fer you, see."

She laughed tonelessly and went out. When she was gone he moved over to the table and looked at his breakfast. The two grease-soaked eggs were cold. The coffee was cold. The toast was hard and without butter. But he was hungry, managed to eat most of it.

Half an hour later the woman returned. She had a newspaper under her

arm, one which had previously been read.

He took it ungraciously, flopped on the bed and started reading it. As he had expected, he saw a short article on the front page under a Los Angeles date line. The article mentioned the fact that the police in Los Angeles were looking for one Duke Rath, jewel robber.

Wondering what the police out there would think if they happened to see that article, John Murdock tossed the paper aside. He had arranged for that article the day before, thinking that it might come in handy.

The morning passed slowly. At twelve-thirty Mother Gessler brought him his dinner. The food was terrible. He complained about it, and she cursed him, slamming the door when she left. But she brought him a better tray that night, just at dusk, collected another hundred dollars and eyed his roll with a hungry look.

When she had gone, this time, John Murdock again examined his guns, then he fell to pacing the floor with soft, catlike steps. Tuesday night, Gloria had said. Well, it was Tuesday night, and the restlessness which he had felt throughout the day had sharpened his nerves and made him eager and anxious. He looked at his watch. It was just a few minutes after eight. Moving over to the switch on the wall, he clicked off the lights. For a few minutes he waited. Then he moved halfway to the door. His ears suddenly caught the whisper of a sound out in the hall. His hand slipped into his pocket and clutched his gun.

Moving swiftly to the side of the room, he waited. He heard the sound again, heard a slight noise as the knob of his door was twisted and a shadowy form slipped into his room.

"Mr. Rath," the figure whispered. "Mr. Rath."

"Gloria," he gasped.

He moved forward swiftly, reaching out for the woman's hands. In the dim shadows of the room he couldn't see her clearly, and she didn't seem so tall as he had remembered her. But when he reached her he saw that she was stooped forward. Then he saw that she was wearing old clothes and that her face looked haggered and drawn.

"Gloria," he whispered, "Gloria. What are you doin' here? What is it all about? Why—"

"Wait John," she interrupted him. "Listen."

Footsteps sounded outside in the hall. They hesitated at the door, then moved on to the next room.

"That—that's him," Gloria whispered.

"Who?" the detective demanded.

"The man Welch is to meet. He's in the room next to yours. Welch will be here at nine."

Gripping Gloria's hands tightly, Murdock demanded: "What is it all about, girl. How did you get mixed up in it?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you now, John. I—I can't even stay. I don't dare stay. Will you—will you do something for me?"

John Murdock's lips tightened. He felt hurt, angry. The woman must have sensed how he felt, for she said, softly: "I'll tell you, John. I'll tell you tonight—at your apartment. But will you do this for me, now? Find out what happens there in that room when Welch comes to see that man."

"I may not stop at just finding out what happens," Murdock said, darkly.

"But you mu—" She broke off as the door to the room opened suddenly. As she sprang away, John Murdock looked toward the door and saw the Gessler woman standing there, a twisted sneer on her face.

"Well, whut do you want?" he snarled.

MOTHER GESSLER looked at Gloria West. "So that's why you wanted to know where Rath's room was, huh?"

"What of it?" Gloria snapped back. "I used to know the Duke out on the coast."

Mother Gessler laughed sarcastically. "Maybe Tony Welch used to know him, too." Then her face hardened. "I thought you came here with a message for the man in the next room."

"He—he wasn't in," Gloria answered; "but he's there now. I'll take it to him." She walked out the door, past Mother Gessler, and a moment later John Mur-

dock heard her knocking on the door of the next room. He tried to see past her into the hall, but the man in the next room only opened the door an inch or so, listened to what Glorida West had to say and then shut the door again.

As Gloria started toward them again, Mother Gessler said: "Now get out, you. If it wasn't for Tony Welch . . . ." She didn't finish her sentence.

"So long, Babe," Murdock called after Gloria. "I'll be seein' you."

Gloria said, "Sure, Duke. Give me a ring."

Mother Gessler was scowling at the detective. She said to him: "I wouldn't give two cents for your chances after Tony Welch heard what happened. You better lam, mister."

Murdock shook his head, slammed the door with an angry oath.

This much he knew that he hadn't known before: Gloria West was in close contact with Tony Welch. She had come here from him with a message for the man Welch was to meet.

Frowning, he paced the floor, calling to mind all that he had been able to learn about Welch over a long distance telephone call to New York. Welch was a man in his late forties. He was well educated, had no apparent source of income. He had been suspected of being implicated in several confidence game rings, but there was no definite evidence against him. He had once been closely associated with Cavaleri, a man who had headed an international dope ring. Cavaleri was now dead.

But who could Welch be coming to see in Central City? And what could Gloria's connection be with him?

Suddenly the detective stopped. Through the thin partitions which separated his room from the next, he heard a sharp thud. Then, a moment later, the sound of a closing door and swift footsteps hurrying down the hall.

Glancing at his watch, the detective saw that it still lacked ten minutes of being nine o'clock and slipping over to his door, he opened it. There was no one in the hall, and the building was still. He stepped outside, closed his door and moved swiftly to the door of the next room. Turning the knob, he leaned against it. The door wasn't locked. It opened easily, soundlessly. Looking into the room, the detective saw the body of a man sprawled out in the middle of the floor.

He clicked on the lights, stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The man was past all help. His life was running out through a red gash across his throat, and already his eyes were filmed with a wide, glassy stare. The face of the man looked somehow familiar, but Murdock couldn't place it.

Here was murder, brutal, ruthless murder. For a moment John Murdock forgot the part he was playing. His eyes swept the room, photographing the scene in his mind. There was no evidence of any struggle.

He made a quick search of the room, found nothing. The window was nailed shut. Returning to the man's body, he bent over it and started searching the pockets. He was in that position when the door behind him opened suddenly, and a harsh voice, snarled: "Stand up, you, an' back over to that wall."

JOHN MURDOCK stood up, turned, raised his hands shoulder high. In the doorway stood a large, heavy-set man, his puffy red face twisted in anger, a gun in his hand. The man was Tony Welch. He knew that as soon as he saw him, for he fit the description of Welch given him over the telephone by the New York police.

"Back up to the wall," Welch whipped out.

Murdock backed away. He saw Welch come into the room, shoot a swift glance at the dead man on the floor, then fasten his eyes on him.

"Where's the stuff?" he demanded.

The detective shook his head, remembered that he was supposed to be Duke Rath and stuttered, "I—I was in de next room. I heard a noise an'—"

"Come on," Welch interrupted. "Where's the stuff? What have you done with it?"

Again Murdock shook his head, cringing back against the wall.

Welch stared at him, marched forward, stepping over the murdered man.

"Talk, damn you. Talk!" Welch snarled.

Murdock moistened his lips. He lowered his hands a little, then, his eyes widening, he stared over Welch's shoulder toward the door. John Murdock saw Mother Gessler standing there, her face very pale, her eyes wide with fright. She screamed piercingly as she saw the bloody body.

It was a life-saver for Murdock. Welch turned involuntarily. The detective's clenched fist smashed out and connected with the man's jaw. The blow staggered him, and a shot from his gun went wild. He didn't have time to fire again. Twice more Murdock's fists lashed out, driving him backwards across the room. The gun slipped from his hand. He stumbled, fell to the floor.

Mother Gessler screamed again. Murdock whipped out his gun and sent a bullet plowing into the wall above her head. She yelped, this time in real terror, and then keeled over in a dead faint.

Murdock hurried to the door, stepped over her, and ran down the hall. He went down the stairs two at a time, and, as he got to the lower floor, he heard a battering on the front door. That battering, he knew, was the police. They were watching the building, and the shots had brought them. He turned toward the back door, but as he reached it, some one outside started raining heavy blows on it. They had closed in very effectively.

The detective lifted the bar that held the back door closed and stepped aside. Jimmie Spence barged in, a gun in each hand. Behind him were more men. Spence raised his guns, directed them on Murdock.

"Spence," Murdock whipped out, sharply.

Jimmie Spence lowered his guns. He said: "Golly, chief. For a minute—"

"Listen, Spence," Murdock interrupted. "There's a murdered man upstairs. Find out who he is. There's a man and woman out cold. Arrest 'em. Arrest anyone else in the place. Go through every room for fingerprints. Those you can't identify, wire to Washington for identification. Then close this place up an leave several men here to guard it. I'll telephone you further instructions as soon as I can."

Spence nodded. "Where can I reach you?"

"You can't. And get this straight—I escaped. Just to play safe, send my description out over the radio an' start huntin' for me. They'll try to blame me for the murder."

"But what—"

Murdock brushed past Spence and past the other two detectives who were staring at him in surprise. He reached the alley, ran down it to the street, and then started walking rapidly toward town. In a basement pool-hall near headquarters he found a chair, slouched down in it, and nodded as though sleepy. The patrons of the place paid little attention to him. In other chairs around the room, other men were dozing or watching the games with casual interest.

For almost an hour he sat there, impatient at the necessity of waiting, but knowing that he couldn't make another move until the men returned to headquarters from Mother Gessler's house, and until there had been time enough to check those fingerprints in the place.

Who was it whom he had heard moving down the hall after that thud in the next room? Death? What was the "stuff" to which Welch had referred? What would Welch do now that the man was dead and the "stuff" was gone? How would this murder change Gloria's place in the picture, and where did she fit in, anyhow?

FINALLY, moving over to a telephone booth, he called headquarters and got Bert Andrews on the telephone. Andrews said: "We've done what you asked, chief. But what happened there at Gessler's?"

"What did Welch say?" Murdock asked.

"Welch says that he went there to see Mother Gessler, whom he's known for years. She told him that another friend

of his was there. He went up to see him, opened the door and found you bending over his body. He says you hit him."

"Correct. What about the woman?"

"She says you shot and tried to kill her. She says she doesn't know much about you; that you were brought to her by Warty Scabo who said you wanted to rent a room."

Murdock frowned. Both of those stories were fairly true. Welch hadn't said that he saw Murdock committing the murder. He had related the story as it had happened.

"Who was the murdered man?" the detective asked.

"We don't know yet. There wasn't anything on him to identify him," Andrews answered.

"What about the fingerprints?"

"No report, yet. The woman says that you an' the man who was murdered and one other man were her only roomers."

"Who was the other man?"

"She says his name was Sam Deitz."

"Where was his room?"

"She said it was down the hall from you."

"Checked the fingerprints in that room yet?"

"No, we haven't got any of them checked."

Murdock frowned at the telephone. He said, "How did Welch take the arrest?"

"He's sore as hell. His attorney's on the way down."

"What you holdin' him on, Bert?"

"Just suspicion."

"Well, make it easy for him to get off. When he leaves, have Spence follow him. Keep close tab on him. I'll call you later."

Hanging up, Murdock left the pool-hall. There still wasn't anything to do but wait. The name Sam Deitz didn't mean a thing to him. It was, he thought, an obviously assumed name, for Mother Gessler didn't take in regular boarders.

Leaving the pool-hall he walked toward his own apartment, let himself in the back way, and, securing the key from beneath the carpet, unlocked his door and entered. Gloria had said that she would come here to see him tonight.

For almost an hour he paced the floor, restlessly. Then, when his telephone rang, he jumped for it impatiently.

"Hello," he barked.

"John." It was Gloria's voice. "I can't come to you yet. I know what happened there at Mother's Gessler's. It—it's mixed everything up."

"Where are you?" he demanded.

She ignored his question. "That other man who was at Mother Gessler's," she said, "has a room at the Glenarm hotel. He registered under the name Frank Ball. The Glenarm's just a flop-house. I can't get in. It's only for men. If he has a black brief-case, John, you must get it."

She paused, and Murdock said, swiftly, "I'll get it, Gloria. But where are you? How did—"

The telephone clicked dead. The detective hung up and headed for the door. He knew the Glenarm, a rickety structure with stall-like rooms at two-bits a throw. It housed, mostly, old men or bums who could mooch the tariff on the streets.

IT took him but a few minutes to reach the place. Walking inside, he said to the aged clerk at the desk: "Where's Frankie Ball?"

"Huh?" the clerk frowned.

"He's my pal," Murdock explained. "I got a note fer him."

The clerk looked at his register, said: "Second floor, room two-eight-seven."

Murdock grunted his thanks. He walked over to the stairs, up them to the second floor, and through a door into a long, narrow corridor. Halfway down the corridor he came to a door numbered 287. Listening at it he could hear no sound. Trying the knob, he pushed open the door. The room was empty.

He stepped inside, switched on the dim light and made a quick search. He found no black brief-case. He found nothing. The blanket on the cot was mussed as though someone had lain there earlier in the evening.

There was no point in waiting. The detective turned toward the door. He had taken just one step toward it, when it opened, and three men crowded into the room. When they saw him, they whipped

out their guns. One of them snarled, "Hands up, Cole."

Murdock raised his hands. So the real name of Sam Deitz, alias Frank Ball, was Cole? And it was evident that these three men didn't know Cole, for they had called him by that name. He looked at them closely. One of them was slender, pale, thin-faced. The other two were of average size, older. There was a grim, harsh look about them, and they held their guns as though accustomed to them.

"Friend of ours wants to see you," said the man who had first spoken. "Come along."

Murdock nodded. He moved forward, and the thin-faced chap stepped up to him and removed his guns.

"We're goin' out the front door," said one of the men. "We're gettin' in a car out at the curb. If you don't like it, start somethin', an' finish up on a cement slab at the morgue."

The detective still didn't speak. These were men he didn't know, probably men from out of town. Welch was from out of the city and these were probably his men. Welch had wanted something from the man who had been murdered at Mother Gessler's, and it was logical to think that Welch would guess that if Murdock, playing the part of Duke Rath, hadn't secured what it was that the man had, then, Deitz or Cole, who was the only other man in that hideout, had probably secured it. If that was right, then these men would be taking him to Tony Welch, and if they didn't know Cole by sight, it wouldn't do him any good to argue with them.

He walked out with them, one of them on each side of him and the thin-faced man in the rear. At the curb he got into the car, sitting in the back seat. There was a driver in the front seat, and the thin-faced man got in beside him. The other two got into the back with Murdock.

One of them said, "Okay, let's go."

The car slid out into the traffic.

THE car headed west, moved slowly out of the business district and then found a main boulevard. It passed the old residential part of the city, passed a newer district and turned off on a state highway. Murdock began to worry.

"Where we goin'?" he asked.

Neither of the men answered him.

The car passed the city limits, whirled past a filling station and a beer garden, a barbecue stand and a stand where vegetables were sold. It was moving faster now, and Murdock could feel the gathering tension in the men on either side of him. After a couple of miles one of them leaned forward and said:

"Slow down, Bart. We're almost there."

The car slowed down, turned suddenly off the concrete highway and jolted over a dirt road. John Murdock thought that he knew the road. It was down this road that the body of a man had been found shot to death almost two years before. The road led eventually to a farmhouse.

He had guessed wrong. Just where, he didn't know. But somewhere he had made a terrible mistake. These men weren't taking him to see Tony Welch. They weren't taking him to see anyone. They planned to kill him. But why? They didn't know who he was. It wasn't that they had penetrated his disguise, for they had called him Cole. And they didn't know Cole, or they would have known that he wasn't the man they had been sent to get. They were hired killers.

But hired by whom and for what reason? Murdock's mind groped with the problem but could find no answer.

The car slid to a sudden stop and one of the men at Murdock's side said sharply: "Here's where you get out, brother." The other man opened the door.

Murdock saw the driver look around, saw the thin-faced man get out of the car and saw that he held a gun in each hand. As soon as he stepped out, those guns would start belching lead. He didn't have a chance out there.

He stood up. The night was dark and still. The road they had left was far away. The air was cool. He said, and his voice sounded thin and high: "Who—who do you think I am?"

"We know, brother," said the man who had spoken before. "Get out. This is the

end of the line." He gave Murdock a shove.

The detective staggered. He whipped his fist out at the face of the man nearest to him. It was a forlorn, desperate chance. Outside waited a man with a gun. In the front seat was a man undoubtedly armed. In the back seat were two more. But John Murdock had no time to reckon odds. That fist crashed home and it was followed by another.

The man yelled, kicked at the detective's shins. The other man reared up in his seat, cursing and swinging a clubbed gun. Murdock ducked under the blow, grasped the man's wrist with one hand and smashed him in the face with his other fist. He jerked away the gun.

Something thudded against his head with stunning force, knocking him forward as the man in the front seat swung at him. He fell against one of the men in the back seat of the car, twisted his gun around. But before he fired he heard a gun crashing outside the car, heard the thin-faced man yelling. This, then, was the end, or at least, very close to the end. But before that man out there got him, he would at least take a few of them with him.

He jerked on the trigger of his gun, twisted it and pulled the trigger again. One of the men screamed and he heard the sound of breaking glass. A bullet nicked his shoulder. He fired again, turned around and looked for the thin-faced man. The thin-faced man wasn't in sight, and when he looked to the front of the car, he saw that the driver had slumped forward in his seat like a man dead.

A voice, Gloria's voice, came to him. "John—John, are you all right."

He turned toward the sound of that voice, sure for a moment that he must be dead or dreaming. But the form of the woman which loomed up out of the night was very real. When he got out of the car and she reached him, he knew that he wasn't dead or dreaming.

Her face was very pale, and she was trembling. A gun slid out of her hands, hit Murdock's foot as it fell, and as he looked down at it he saw another thing—the thin faced man. He was lying face down on the ground by the side of the car.

JOHN MURDOCK took the woman by the shoulders, held her away from him, his hands tight and heavy. He said, "Yes, Gloria. I'm all right. But I wouldn't have been if you hadn't—"

"Those—those men in the car?"

"I took care of a couple of them. The driver and this chap out here are the rest. Where did you come from, Gloria? How did you happen to be out here?"

"I knew they would bring you here," she said, simply. "There wasn't time to call the police. They couldn't have gotten here in time. I had to come. My car's over there." She pointed ahead. "I—I had gone too far. I almost didn't get back here in time."

"You knew about this place?"

"Yes. Tony Welch said to take you to the place they had picked out Sunday. I was with them Sunday."

"It was planned that far ahead?"

"Yes, but for some one else."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I think for Mr. Goddard."

"Goddard?"

"Yes, the man who was killed at Mother Gessler's."

The detective nodded. Goddard—Wesley Goddard. He knew now why it was that that man's face had seemed familiar. Not two months before, he had seen the man's photograph in the paper in connection with a divorce action brought by the man's wife.

He turned back to the car, examined the two men in the rear seat. One of them was past help. The other, simply unconscious, he bound, using the man's necktie and his own. The driver, stunned from a scalp wound, he tied up with some wire he located in a pocket of the car. The thin-faced man outside was dead. He said nothing about his condition to Gloria West, but loaded his body into the car, thankful that her shooting had been accurate. Then he turned back to face her.

"Is—is he—" She didn't finish the question.

Murdock shook his head, and he saw the look of relief that came to her face on hearing his deliberate lie.

"Maybe this sounds strange, John," she said to him. "But I'm glad I didn't kill him. I—"

"I know," he nodded. "Now tell me what this is all about, Gloria."

She sat down on the running board of the car, looked up at him. A wistful smile touched her lips. She said: "John, I wouldn't blame you if you never spoke to me again. I—I came so near to causing your death that I'll never—"

Murdock sat down at her side, took her hand for a moment, holding it awkwardly. "I've bunked with Death for a good many years, Gloria. He's an old friend of mine. Now, tell me what this is all about."

She nodded. "Do you know Helen Benson?"

"I know of her. She's rather out of my circle."

"Well, she's always been my best friend, even though many people don't like her—think her flighty, fickle. And I guess she is. But she's engaged, you know, to Allen Stark, and she really loves him. She loves him so much that about a month ago she converted everything she has into cash to meet the demands of some one who was blackmailing her because of some letters she had written several years ago. Allen Stark, she knew, wouldn't listen to gossip, but she was afraid of what he might do if he saw those letters.

"She paid fifty thousand dollars to get them back—and didn't get them. The blackmailer demanded fifty thousand more. He had her and was putting on the screws. That's when she came to me. She wanted me to help her. I agreed. I didn't have a lot of money, but if what I had would help her she could have it. Only when it came to paying the money out, I wanted to be sure that we got the letters. You see, I—I've had a little experience with men like the one who was blackmailing her.

"She agreed to let me handle the payment, but when arrangements were made, I discovered that the money had to be delivered to an address in New York City. That's when I left here, and the man I met in New York City happened to be Tony Welch. He took the money, gave me the letters, and I destroyed them. Then he insisted on taking me out to dinner, and he was so elated, so mysterious, that I went along. He drank a great deal. He didn't get drunk, but he did talk some. Enough so that I learned he was just acting as an agent for some one here in Central City; that that person had a wide-open market in the blackmail business, and that that person needed help. He dropped a couple of names of people whom I knew, people who were going to be made to pay up, 'or else.'

"I suppose I should have gone to the police right then, but I didn't know who it was in Central City who was back of things. So instead, I stayed in New York City a couple of days and got him to bring me out here. He thought I was a clever go-between woman, and decided that I might be of use to him.

"Well, we came back here, but I couldn't find out who his boss was. It seems the man was away, and Tony Welch was irritable and cross. I got a room in the same hotel with him but wouldn't go out with him. By this time I discovered that the man here was afraid to tie up with any local gangsters and didn't have the nerve to go ahead on his own. Welch brought several men out from New York City with him. That—that was a hard two weeks, John, while we waited for this man to come back. You were hunting me. I didn't dare go out. I was so deep into it then that I had to see it through. Then finally the man returned, but he wouldn't come to the hotel. He insisted on another meeting place, and Welch suggested Mother Gessler's. He had known her long ago, and her place must have fitted this local man's idea of an ideal place for whatever plotting they had to do. That's why I wanted a man there—to see what happened."

"And the local man was Goddard?"

"Yes. When his wife divorced him, he was broke, desperate. But his wife had been society editor on one of the papers

and in that capacity had picked up a lot of scandal and relayed it to him. He decided, now, to start cashing in on it, and he must have spent the past several months getting his facts into some tangible condition. He went to New York City, got in touch with Welch, told Welch what he had. Welch didn't believe him, wanted him to prove it. Well, I went there with the proof—fifty thousand of my own money."

MURDOCK nodded. The picture was beginning to come into focus. Goddard, with a fund of information and material good for blackmailing purposes, but lacking in the guts to make good his threats if his victims rebelled; going to Welch with a proposition to come in with him; Welch coming to Central City to meet Goddard. Then some one stepping in and lifting the material after killing Goddard.

Murdock stood up. "Gloria, where is Welch?"

"At the Palomar, room five-forty-eight."

"Why did he want me killed?"

"It wasn't you. Only I was afraid that it would be you. He sent his men down there just after I called you. He sent them to get the other man who was in Mother Gessler's. One of his men was outside, saw Sam Deitz leave, followed him, then came back and told Tony Welch where he was. I heard and went and called you from my room. When I got back, he was sending his men after him. I called you again, but you were gone."

"Where did you hear about a black brief-case?"

"From Welch. He said that Goddard was bringing him the stuff he had collected in a black brief-case."

Murdock reached down and pulled Gloria to her feet. He said to her: "Girl, will you do something for me?"

"What, John?"

"Will you get in your car and drive down to the station and wait for me there? Will you let me handle this thing from now on?"

"How?"

"Well, I'll drive this car in to the hospital. Then I want to scrape this dye off my face. After that I'll come down to the station and tell you."

"You'll have to find Sam Deitz."

"I'll find him."

"And get that brief-case. The—the things he has collected are about friends of mine, John. I wouldn't want the papers—"

"I'll take care of that."

He led her to her car, helped her inside. "Some day, Gloria," he promised, "I'll be able to thank you for what you did for me tonight."

She shook her head and said, shakily, "Hurry and get that dye off, John." Then she put the car into gear and started down the road toward the highway.

Murdock got into the other car and followed her. The bodies of the men who brought him out there were piled in the back.

John Murdock followed Gloria's car halfway through Central City, but he turned off toward the General Hospital just at the edge of the business district, and reaching it, he drove in the ambulance entrance and up to the receiving room. From the hospital he called Andrews, asked him to come out and take charge of the men he was leaving. Two, he knew, would go directly toward the morgue. The others, to the jail, after minor wounds had been dressed.

The interne at the hospital tried to detain the detective, but Murdock brushed him aside and got away. There was a taxi in front of the building and he took it, telling the driver to take him to the Palomar. Removing that dye could wait. There was something else that was much more important.

The Palomar was a good hotel. The doorman, after one glance at the detective, tried to steer him away but Murdock pushed past him just as he had the interne at the hospital. He ran across the hotel lobby, up the stairs. He knew that within a short time the hotel detective would be looking for him, but the Palomar was a large hotel. By the time the hotel detective had located him, he might be wanting help. Just now, he didn't.

He climbed the stairs to the fifth floor, puffing a little as he reached the top. He found 548. Listening at the door, he heard a murmur of voices. He tried the knob cautiously. The door was locked. Then he felt for his guns. He had taken them from the body of the thin-faced man before delivering him to the hospital.

Pulling one of them out, he knocked on the door. Inside, the talking stopped abruptly. He knocked again. Footsteps approached the door, a key turned in the lock, the knob turned. Murdock didn't wait for any more. He lunged against the door, crashing it open and sending the man who had been standing before it reeling backwards against one of the other two men in the room. The third man, standing against the wall, looked once at Murdock's gun and then raised his hands. That third man was Tony Welch.

"Fine, Welch," Murdock nodded. "Have your men do it, too."

THE two men had recovered their balance. They let their guns slide to the floor, raised their hands, stared stonily at the detective.

"Back against the wall," Murdock ordered.

They moved back, a little sullenly.

Murdock kicked the door shut. He said, "This is the pay-off, Welch. I don't like guys like you in my town. We ain't got room for 'em except in the cemetery."

Welch frowned. "Just who are you?" he asked, wonderingly.

Murdock grinned. "To Mother Gessler I'm Duke Rath. To you, Welch, I'm Captain John Murdock of the Central City police."

By Welch's start of surprise Murdock knew that Welch hadn't guessed his identity. But Welch still didn't seem worried. The expression on his face was one of a man who is bewildered and puzzled.

"Who is Cole?" Murdock demanded.

Welch shrugged. "Never heard of him."

"Well, then, who is Sam Deitz?"

"Never heard of him, either."

The detective frowned. It was obvious that Welch was lying, but then, that was only natural. Something else about the whole picture puzzled him. Something in the picture was in the wrong place. It didn't make sense.

He said to Welch: "You went to Mother Gessler's tonight to meet Goddard, to get some papers from him."

Welch grinned. "Prove it."

"You were planning a venture in blackmail on a grand scale."

"Prove it," Welch suggested again.

"But some one beat you to Goddard, killed him, got away with the papers. Sam Deitz, or maybe his name was Cole."

Welch shrugged. "I still don't see what you've got on me. Why don't you go after Deitz or Cole or whatever his name is?"

Murdock grunted. He eyed the two men who stood at Welch's side. They still had their hands up. He looked back to Welch. There was a mocking expression in Welch's eyes. Welch hadn't lied when arrested earlier in the evening. He had said that he found "Duke Rath" bending over Goddard's body. Mother Gessler hadn't lied either. Welch had been indignant at his arrest. What was it that was wrong? What was it that he had overlooked?

Then, still frowning at Welch, it came to him. Those men who had come to get Deitz hadn't looked for any black brief-case. Why? There could only be one answer? Welch already had it. How had he secured it? From Deitz? No, that was impossible. He hadn't seen Deitz. There was only one way he could have secured it. Welch had been the man who had called on Goddard ten minutes early. He had killed him, taken the brief-case away and then, ten minutes later returned, sure that he would find Murdock in that room. Why sure? Because of the noise he had made leaving, because Mother Gessler had told him of the man in the next room, and because by returning he would seem to put himself in the clear so far as the murder was concerned. He hadn't said that Murdock had killed the man because he knew that if Murdock, whom he thought of as Duke Rath, was ar-

rested, his testimony would clear him of any suspicion.

Murdock grinned. The pieces of the picture fitted together perfectly, now. The blackmail setup looked fine to Tony Welch. He would eliminate Goddard and take it over. He would frame the killing so that some one else would be blamed for it, and he would be sure that that man was killed so that the case could be closed. So he had sent his men out to take Deitz for a ride.

WELCH said, "Well, got it figured out?"

The detective nodded. "What did you do with the knife?"

Welch caught his breath, then forced a smile that seemed strained and unnatural. He shook his head.

"Where's the black brief-case?" Murdock went on.

Welch licked his lips. He said, hoarsely, "I'm gettin' a little tired of this."

"Where is it?" Murdock snapped.

Welch made no answer.

"Then the knife?" Murdock whipped at him. "You killed Goddard, Welch. I can prove it."

Welch managed a laugh. His eyes shot over at his two men. Guilt was written on his face. He shifted nervously on his feet.

"Those men you sent to take Cole for a ride didn't do so well," Murdock jibed. "Two dead, two in the hospital, Cole still free. How does that sound to you?"

Tony Welch took a step forward. His face was more ruddy, flushed. He was breathing faster. "I'm gettin' tired of this," he grated. "If you're goin' to arrest me, go ahead. If not, get out."

The detective nodded. "You're under arrest, Welch. If it'll make you feel better, I'll call the wagon." He stepped over to the telephone on the wall, took down the receiver, held it against his ear and said, sideways at the mouthpiece, "Get me the police station." Then he let the receiver slip from his grasp and stooped over as though to recover it.

Welch yelled, "Now!" and clawed for the gun in his shoulder-holster. He got it out, but it was torn from his grasp by Murdock's first shot. A second shot plowed into his upper arm, whirling him around. The man at his side grabbed for a gun in his pocket, fired once before Murdock's bullet ripped through his chest. The third man danced away, his hands high, his face as pale as a sheet. Murdock walked up to him, slammed his gun against the man's head and knocked him out. Then he walked over to where Tony Welch was leaning against the wall. Welch's face was now pale, and his eyes were wide with fear. Outside in the hall people were shouting, but Murdock wasn't worried about that, yet.

His eyes fastened on Welch's face and he said, slowly, "I ought to save the county the cost of the trial. You've got it comin', Welch. Can you take it?" He raised his gun.

"No—no!" Welch gagged. "The—the stuff you want. It—it's in my bag."

The detective laughed. "Not enough, Welch. Where's the knife?"

"I didn't—I didn't—"

"Where's the knife?" Murdock rasped out. He lifted the gun higher and his hand tightened on the trigger.

Welch's jaw worked up and down. He said, finally: "I—I threw it from the Center Street bridge. It—it's in the river."

Some one was rapping on the door. A voice demanded that it be opened, a heavy voice weighted with authority. Murdock walked over to the door and raising his voice called, "You open that door an' I'll blast hell out of you."

Out in the hallway things grew silent. The detective heard men whispering, heard several of them move away. From the street came the sound of a police siren. Those men out there would wait for the police, and that would give him all the time he wanted.

He walked over to Tony Welch's bag, opened it and inside he found a black brief-case. He took all the papers in the brief-case out of it and stuffed them securely into his pockets. Then he collected the loose guns in the room and said to Welch: "Try to change your story,

Welch, an' I'll really go to work on you. But it won't do you any good to try an' change it. The bed of that river is heavy gravel. We'll get the knife easy."

Footsteps sounded down the hallway. Out in the corridor he heard Bert Andrews' voice, ordering: "Open that door."

Murdock grinned. He walked over to the door and opened it. As he did so, and as Andrews came in, he heard a crash behind him. Whirling around, he caught just a glimpse of Tony Welch's body as it hurtled out into the night and toward the alley paving five floors below. Welch had chosen a quicker death than that provided by the state.

HALF an hour later, back in his office, John Murdock handed the papers he had taken from Welch's bag over to Gloria West. "You destroy them," he suggested. "You've saved some of your friends a lot of trouble and maybe a lot of money. But I don't like it. I thought, last time, that you said you were through with things like this."

"I thought I was, John," she answered, starting to tear the papers to bits. "But when Helen Benson came to me, I couldn't—"

"How many more Helen Bensons do you know?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "No more, John."

"Well, I'm goin' to make it my business to see that there aren't any more. Do you understand that?"

She looked at him, flushed and looked quickly away. Murdock stood up. He felt strangely excited, but when he would have reached out for her, he remembered the whiskers on his face and the yellow stain on his skin.

"Damn this dye," he muttered. Then: "Don't hurry with that job, Gloria. There's something I want to do."

He was reaching for his razor as he spoke, and for the bottle of chemical solution which would remove the stain.

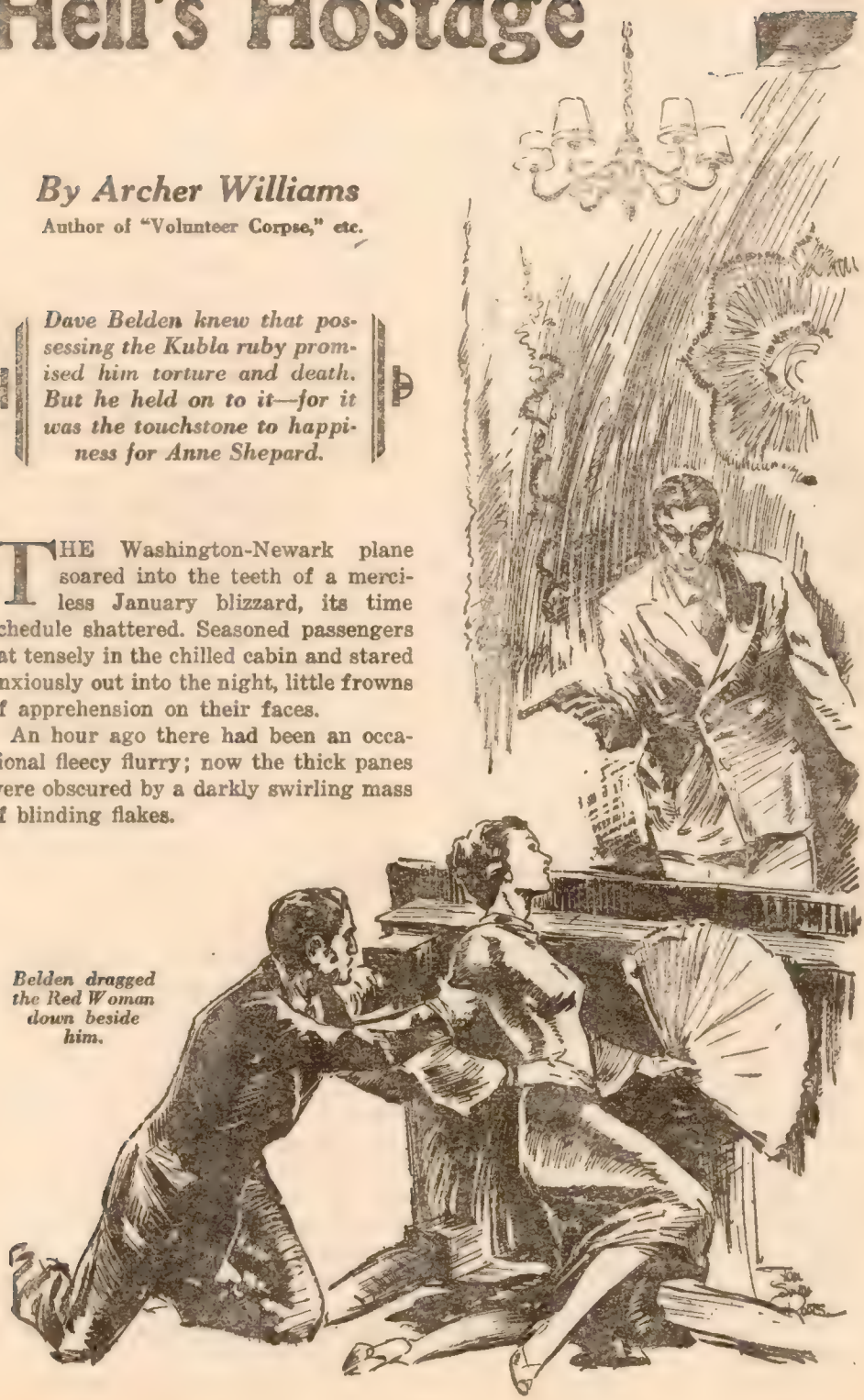
Hell's Hostage

By Archer Williams
Author of "Volunteer Corpse," etc.

Dave Belden knew that possessing the Kubla ruby promised him torture and death. But he held on to it—for it was the touchstone to happiness for Anne Shepard.

THE Washington-Newark plane soared into the teeth of a merciless January blizzard, its time schedule shattered. Seasoned passengers sat tensely in the chilled cabin and stared anxiously out into the night, little frowns of apprehension on their faces.

An hour ago there had been an occasional fleecy flurry; now the thick panes were obscured by a darkly swirling mass of blinding flakes.



Belden dragged the Red Woman down beside him.

Anne Shepard shrank back into the corner of her seat and shivered.

A man came up the short aisle and dropped into the seat at her side. He was tall and his knees crowded in against the back of the chair ahead. His thick, black hair was slicked back and plastered down with some patent gloss. His features were coarse, and his beady eyes shifted continually.

He took a copy of the *Washington Standard* from under his arm and shook it out. He appeared to look at it casually, seemingly indifferent to the furiously raging elements.

He spoke in a low, rasping voice, through the corner of his mouth: "I sized it up pretty straight. There's four of those babies on this crate."

The girl fought to erase fright from her pretty features. "Federal dicks? You sure it's us they're tailing?"

The man's short laugh was not one of amusement. "You're nuts if you think they turned you loose expecting you to go picking daisies."

"You mean they figured I'd contact Dave?"

"I wouldn't be worth a tenth of what you're paying me to defend you if I couldn't figure out that much. These Feds are simple guys—so simple they're dangerous. The Kubla wasn't on you when the ship docked. You were seen aboard running around with Dave Belden. Answer: You slipped the Kubla to him, and he lammed when the boat docked in New York. So they take you to Washington and let you hire a lawyer, then pretend to drop the case for lack of evidence. They turn you loose, figuring you'll head straight for Belden and queer his hideout."

"The lousy heels." The girl's eyes were wide with alarm. "We got to shake 'em somehow."

"Not so easy." Franzheim laid his hand on hers. She quickly shook it away. He doubled up the hand and smacked it down hard on his own knee. He scowled darkly.

"I could maybe shake these dicks—but I don't know why I should risk disbarment to give a break to a snooty dame like you."

She laid her hand on his arm, tried to put warmth in her smile. "Listen, big boy, right now I am thinking of only one thing. I wouldn't mind if there was only one or two. But four of them! How can we shake four bloodhounds, even if their noses *aren't* properly hooked up to their brains?"

Franzheim looked a little worried. "I don't know—yet."

"Well, you better figure out something before we land at Newark," she said acidly.

"Say, you're an ungrateful little twist—after I try so hard to give you a break."

"You're getting yours, Mr. Franzheim. You got no kick."

"I'm an attorney, not a nursemaid. You're a novice at this racket. You and this guy Belden ought to get some sense and join up with an outfit that knows the ice smuggling ropes. You two will land in the can the next time."

The girl looked out of the window. A little shiver gripped her. She looked back at Franzheim. Her voice shook: "What outfit you mean? The Red Woman?"

He nodded grimly. "You should know. You and that Belden guy had the nerve to dope her agent on board the *Transoceanic* and take the famous Kubla ruby from him. Maybe you don't think she's got the inside track on that little job by now?"

The girl looked thoroughly frightened. "We didn't know he was working for the Red Woman! I tell you, we'd never have—"

"All right, save the alibis for when you see the Red Woman. You'll need them."

"You think she'll try and—?"

"Take a tip, sister. Tell Belden to unload that ruby fast. Contact the Red Woman and give it back. Then tell her you two want a job. That's the only way. Otherwise your life and Belden's life isn't worth a handful of snow flakes."

"How come you know so much about this Red Woman?"

"I'm a criminal lawyer. I handled the cases of some of her agents."

The girl's face was a mask of fear as she turned and stared out the window. She shuddered violently.

THERE was an interruption in the steady hum of the motors of the huge transport. The words, "Emergency landing!" were whispered among the frightened passengers. Ice films were encrusting the wings, endangering the giant ship.

Franzheim's tone was casual when he spoke again: "They better set this crate down somewhere before she cracks."

The great ship rocked. Looking ahead, Anne could see the anxious expressions on the drawn faces of the two pilots as their eyes strained ahead into the blizzard.

"Radio compass must be out of order," a man passenger said importantly.

"Poor fool," said Franzheim, "to make a remark like that out loud."

One woman suddenly screamed as the ship lurched sickeningly. Another fainted. A stewardess, comely and neat in her trim uniform, hurried up the aisle with a small portable oxygen tank.

"She's always ready with that stuff," said Franzheim. "At high altitudes they sometimes faint."

The ship twisted and reared, then seemed to plunge suddenly earthward. The expressions on the faces of the passengers were a study in pastiness and strain. Anne's hand gripped Franzheim's arm.

Anxious minutes followed. Then, from the blackness ahead came the sound of a siren.

The huge plane bounded gently, rolled on solid ground.

"Oh, oh! Am I glad!" said a woman fervently.

The co-pilot opened the little connecting door and announced: "Regret forced landing due to insufficient visibility. Passengers will kindly seek shelter in emergency quarters at edge of field."

Franzheim looked at Anne and motioned with his head. She answered him with a little frightened frown.

Five minutes later, having abandoned their baggage, they were hurrying through the blizzard.

They found the shelter, a sturdy log cabin in a wind-swept clearing. It was a desolate spot, hemmed in by Jersey scrub pines. A narrow, ice-crusted road twisted away through the snow-tipped trees.

Inside, a huge blaze roared in the fireplace. The other passengers stomped in, one by one. Franzheim indicated with his eyes two of the Federal men. One was sandy-haired and freckled. He looked young. The other was heavy-jowled and capable. His eyes flashed everywhere in a casual manner.

Franzheim said: "The other two are going through your things."

Anne spread her hands out to the blaze and nodded. The fire lit up her face and glinted in her auburn hair—made her almost beautiful, in spite of the strain. Franzheim laid his hand on her shoulder. She turned a frightened gaze up into his face. She firmly disengaged his hand. A slight shudder convulsed her figure.

The passengers from the plane were talking and chatting, raising their voices to be heard above the whine of the wind, trying to appear like veteran air travelers, taking their marooning as a matter of course.

Franzheim breathed in her ear: "I'm going outside to have a look around."

She nodded.

A few minutes later he was back. "There isn't a car on the place, but they've telephoned for a limousine to take the party to a hotel in Trenton. That gives me an idea. If we could only shake those Feds for a few minutes."

The other two Federal men had come in with a few more stragglers. The man in charge of the emergency shelter had brought out a big tray of cups. The aroma of fresh coffee pervaded the warm room. He set the tray down on a rough table which was covered by a red checkered cloth.

Anne nudged Franzheim. She pressed a tiny phial into his palm. "The same

stuff we used on the boat. Quick! The coffee pot! While he's in here!"

Franzheim nodded. He reached down and picked up his muffler from where it had fallen at his feet. He stepped to the outer door and went outside. It closed behind him with a gust of wind. Tiny particles of snow whipped into their faces. It was blowing very hard.

The shelter attendant breezed cheerily around the table, setting out cups and saucers, and keeping up a running fire of conversation. He seemed to be starved for company. It was very lonesome in such places in the winter.

From the kitchen at his back there came a faint click, as of a door latch. No one seemed to hear it—at least no one paid any attention to it.

A couple of moments later, Franzheim tramped in through the outer door. He caught Anne's eye. She yawned, went over to a corner and started to stretch out on a birch-log settee.

The eyes of the Federal men were following her. Franzheim came over to the fireplace and stood leaning on the mantle. He accepted his coffee and pretended to sip it.

The chattering of the passengers gradually subsided. The placid calm of the fire, the warm atmosphere, the fragrant coffee—all seemed to contribute to a delicious lassitude. Their nerves quieted. They yawned, one by one, and complained of being sleepy.

When the limousine chartered by the Eastern Airways arrived three-quarters of an hour later, only two men, apparently, were awake in the tiny cabin. One was Franzheim and the other was one of the Federal men. Franzheim went over to him. The man's eyes were bloodshot. He swayed in his seat, blinked.

The shelter attendant opened the door for the chauffeur of the limousine. As he turned his back, Franzheim gave the Federal man a little shove, and he folded up and began to snore softly.

Franzheim called out in a whisper. Anne suddenly sat up. She glanced around the room, then stretched deliberately. She pulled her coat around her and walked over to Franzheim.

"I'm ready," she said.

"We're the only ones who stayed awake," said Franzheim to the shelter attendant.

"They're all sleeping so sound, I can't understand it," said the attendant, frowning. He started to shake them. They stirred and made little moaning sounds, but none of them woke up. "Gee," said the attendant, "this is funny. I wonder what—?"

Franzheim spoke up: "They look bad. You better do something, buddy. If they pass out from that rotten coffee you served, or anything, your company'll have a swell suit on its hands. I'm a lawyer. Better have the driver bring a doctor back from Trenton."

The attendant agreed, looking scared.

THE *Walfordian* was an old hotel in the neighborhood of Union Square, its faded hangings and decrepit period furniture drably reminiscent of vanished pomp.

In a dingy room on the ninth floor, a man pored over a newspaper that was yellowed and brittle with age. It was spread out across a dirty runner which dubiously decorated the scarred surface of the ancient dresser against which he leaned.

He wore a coat which ill fitted his broad, well-developed shoulders; his trousers did not match his coat, and were threadbare. He had on a gray flannel shirt and, in place of a necktie, had a ragged brown scarf twisted about his throat. On the wrinkled counterpane of the sagging bed lay a pancaked uniform cap bearing a taxi driver's badge.

He was unshaven and his eyes were bloodshot, probably from the icy blasts which whistled around the building and rattled the windows. The tips of his ears were red, as if he had just come in. His jaw had a firm set, and his lips were rigid lines of determination as he read the paper.

Graying headlines of two decades ago screamed faintly up at him:

VANISHED ACTRESS FEARED MURDER VICTIM

Ruth Markham, well known actress who disappeared ten days ago, has met with foul play, according to statement of relatives today. A brother, Gerald Markham, acting as spokesman for the family, openly flouted the publicity stunt theory advanced by the police. Mrs. Roger Markham, mother of the actress, is under the care of a physician, he stated, and on the verge of prostration. The idea of a publicity stunt is absurd, he averred. He further—

A light rap on the door interrupted him. He hastily folded the newspaper and thrust it into the top drawer of the dresser.

He plucked at the muffler around his throat until it was high under his chin. He walked over and put his ear to the panel. The knock was repeated. He turned the key and pulled the door open.

A girl stepped hastily into the room. He started to push the door shut behind her, but there was an obstruction. A man stood on the threshold, blocking it with his foot.

The girl's low voice was vibrant with excitement: "It's okay, Dave. I brought Franzheim. Let him in."

"You damn fool, Anne!" gritted the man addressed as Dave. "What the hell's the idea of bringing that lug here?"

"It's on the up and up, Belden," came a rasping voice from beyond the door. "I want to trade. You can trust me."

"Yeah. About as far as I can spit lead," growled Belden. He eased up on the door with a reluctant gesture.

Franzheim squeezed through. "You got nothing to lose. I gave the kid here a break tonight. I'll do the same for you."

Belden shut and locked the door. His mouth was tight-lipped with dull rage. He glared at the girl. "Why couldn't you ditch this shyster? Why'd you have to queer my hideout to him? How the hell do you know he won't—"

"Squeal to the cops?" put in Franzheim. His voice got hard. "Listen, Belden, you got me chalked up wrong." He turned to Anne. "Tell him what happened."

"The Feds sprang me and then tailed me," explained Anne. "There were four of them in the plane. The storm forced it down, and Franzheim doped everybody and we lammed. We been skidding around on icy roads half the night to get here and warn you. Franzheim says you better turn the ruby over to the Red Woman or you'll have lead trouble."

"Oh, he does, does he?" Belden looked queerly at Franzheim for a moment, then backed up against the dresser. "Jeez! Now I know who this heel is! Of all the mouthpieces in this burg, you had to pick him to spring you." He shook his head slowly, keeping his eyes centered on Franzheim.

"What's the matter with him?" cried the girl. "He's a right guy, ain't he?"

"Right guy!" snorted Belden. "Why, he works for the Red Woman. He's her right-hand man."

"Dave! On the level? You sure he's—" She broke off in horrified silence.

"Yeah," replied Belden; "and he came here for only one thing."

The girl turned wrathful eyes on Franzheim. "You dirty rat! I hire you for a mouthpiece and you pull the double-cross!"

Franzheim spoke up. "You two got me all wrong. Sure, I do a little job for the Red Woman now and then. Right now I'm trying to put you two babes in the woods in the right cradle. You'll never get places in ice smuggling if you don't team up with a big outfit. How's about it?"

"I was right," said Belden heavily. His voice carried steel-tinged conviction. "Now you can scram, Franzheim. Tell the Red Woman to lay an egg in some other basket. The girl and I work alone. No splits or big guys for us. Get me?"

Franzheim's face went suddenly taut. His tone was deceptively light. "You turn down the Red Woman?"

"Yeah."

Franzheim nodded shortly. He turned and leaned over to twist the key in the door. Suddenly he whirled, faced them.

Anne Shepard screamed. "Look out, Dave!"

In Franzheim's hand was a Luger, its deadly, thin barrel trained on Belden's heart.

FRANZHEIM'S lips drew back from his teeth in an ugly grin. "I don't know how you happened to pick this hotel, Belden, but you sure pegged yourself neat."

Anne gasped. Belden stared.

"What the hell you mean?"

"The Red Woman has her hangout a couple of blocks away. I don't have to take you far."

Belden's eyes narrowed. "You're taking us to her?"

Franzheim nodded. "You'll see her." His voice had a peculiar inflection. "You know what that means?"

"I been around," said Belden. "I heard what they say about the Red Woman."

"Get your hands away from that drawer!" snarled Franzheim. "Put 'em up!"

Anne flew to Belden's side, heedless of the gun in Franzheim's steady hand. "Dave! It's not worth it! She's got us. We better play ball. She'll—"

Dave Belden shook his head grimly. "I'm kinda curious. I want to see this dame. I heard so much about her."

Anne cried: "But, Dave, you won't stand a chance! You'll—"

"Shut up, Anne!" ordered Belden.

"Turn around!" snapped Franzheim.

Belden obeyed. Franzheim frisked him carefully. Then he started to fan the girl. She whirled and sent a small fist crashing into his face.

"Lay off the rough stuff, you heel!" she cried.

He slapped her against the wall. "Come on, get going, both of you, out to the elevator bank. Don't try any funny stuff or I'll put a slug in your back."

Anne went out first, followed by Belden. Franzheim shoved the gun in his pocket, but kept it carefully leveled. He did not trouble to lock the door.

The first elevator that stopped had passengers aboard. Franzheim motioned to the operator to go on without them. The next car was empty. They crowded in, and the operator did not notice the telltale way Franzheim's hand was bunched in his pocket.

They went down to the cheap, flashy lobby and out under a faded canopy that flapped in the icy wind. They got in a taxi. Franzheim spoke in low tones to the driver, and the cab lurched into a side street.

The roads were rutted with ice furrows that had not felt the pick-ax of snow removers. It had been an unusually cold winter, with sustained periods of low temperatures. The cabby swore again and again as they skidded at corners.

They pulled up in front of the *Hotel Stamford,* an even older and shabbier place than the *Walfordian.* Franzheim ordered Belden and Anne out. Belden did not move. His eyes were bleak as they watched Franzheim.

"Better not try it," gritted Franzheim.

"Please!" pleaded Anne. "He'll shoot!"

Belden got out of the cab and made his way into the dimly-lighted lobby, Anne at his side and Franzheim close at his heels. A sleepy operator threw his newspaper aside and yawned, getting off his stool and closing the elevator as they entered.

The car stopped at the fourteenth floor. The door slid back revealing a steel sheath blocking the shaft. Belden let out a low whistle. The fourteenth floor, in contrast to the rest of the building, was a modern stronghold.

Franzheim reached out and pressed a small chromium disk alongside the steel door. He held his hand so that the other could not see the signal he used. The door slid silently back, and they stepped into a corridor, much the same as the other floors, except that the carpet was newer and richer. At the end of the corridor, the windows were heavily grilled and shaded.

The passage was empty save for two men who sat on a faded sofa. They got up and stood waiting expectantly, their half-closed eyes glittering dangerously. In spite of their openly slouching attitude, there was an air of alertness about them. Their hands were stuck in the side pockets of their coats. They looked as if they were ready to draw their rods and pump lead at the faintest motion of Franzheim's head.

Franzheim prodded Belden roughly down the corridor. They passed a couple of closed doors. Lights showed through

the transoms, but only muffled sounds issued. The entire floor was apparently thoroughly sound-proofed.

The floor on the left was a double door with French handles for knobs. They were of bronze, and highly polished.

Belden glanced behind. The two guards had followed them down the hall. They were standing in readiness, their eyes trained on him.

Franzheim motioned him ahead. He tried the knob. It was not locked. He pushed the door open.

THE room was large and dimly lighted. A large portion of the wall opposite was covered by an enormous tapestry which hung about two feet away from the wall after the manner of an ancient arras. In startling contrast to the surroundings, the subject of the tapestry was a woodland scene of tranquil beauty. Anne gasped when she saw it; her face lost some of its fear for a moment. She seemed to derive strength from sight of the tapestry. Her gaze when she glanced at Belden was more confident.

He looked at her in the dim light, and a puzzled frown crossed his forehead. She nodded to him and back at the tapestry. The ridges on his forehead raised slightly.

Franzheim snarled. "You two keep apart! No signals."

There was no furniture in the room save a heavy table placed before the tapestry, and a single heavy, ornately carved arm chair behind it. The severity of the room's appointments was in itself impressive.

The tapestry moved, as if somebody were passing along behind it. Then, at its left edge, a figure appeared. Anne started, staring wide-eyed. Belden, close to her, could feel her trembling all over. He reached out and gave her arm a reassuring pressure. The gun prodded roughly into his back.

It was the figure of a woman, dressed in a high-necked gown of flaming red. Her hair was luxurious and piled high, reflecting coppery tints. She moved statuesquely to the single chair and seated herself, leaning her arms on the table. She acted as if she were infinitely weary and moving with great effort. Her mien was that of a person who has ceased to have any interest in life.

She carried a large semi-circular fan, its ivory blades each emblazoned with a Chinese dragon. The blades did not taper to a point in conventional style for pivotal binding; instead, where their shanks became narrow, they disappeared within a thick, carved ivory enclosure which also formed the handle. The woman held the fan so that its reverse side did not become visible; she kept her eyes centered on its back.

Not until she was seated did she look up, casting a pair of luminous eyes upon them. She was beautiful in a regal manner difficult to associate with her surroundings.

During her entrance, Franzheim had retreated. The room was now empty save for Anne, Belden and the woman.

The tapestry shook again, indicating the existence of a door hidden behind it. Figures bulked on the other side, and then two short gun barrels were thrust through small openings near the edge of the tapestry, one at each side. Belden and the girl were trapped. They could not have moved ten feet without being shot down.

The woman gazed at them unfeelingly, as if she were a statue suddenly come to life. "I am the Red Woman," she stated simply. The calm simplicity of the statement made it impressive, as if the fact itself were enough to drive fear to the hearts of ordinary men. "Are you ready to return the Kubla ruby which you took from our agent on board the *Transoceanic?*"

"We removed the Kubla from your agent at the risk of our lives," stated Belden quickly. "We were on a definite mission—and well paid. The Kubla is on its way to the person who commissioned us to obtain it. You're too late, Red Woman."

The only sign that his remarks had registered and met with any human reaction was the slight tightening of the

Red Woman's fingers around the handle of her fan.

She said: "You lie. Your movements have been watched. You have made no contact except a visit to a safe deposit vault. The girl has been in the custody of Federal Agents. It would have been impossible for her to have handled the ruby."

Belden bowed his head. "I gave it to you straight, Red Woman. The ruby is on its way. I placed it in that vault as part of the plan."

"You have the key to the box on your person?"

"Of course I haven't," said Belden. "You take me for a fool?"

"You will tell me where that key is. The torture which the Red Woman sometimes resorts to in order to open sealed lips, is not pleasant."

"I'll see you in hell before I hand over that key!" cried Belden.

"I will give you two minutes to think it over."

Belden stared at her, then glanced at Anne. She nodded almost imperceptibly.

Belden's voice changed. It was low. He said: "The Red Woman has a name. What is it?"

"The Red Woman shall remain known as the Red Woman." The voice was weary and carried no animosity.

"The Red Woman's name is Ruth Markham," stated Belden, eyeing her sharply.

There was no perceptible indication of recognition in her face or in the gesture of her hands. She remained as before, a cold, indifferent statue.

"Your answer?"

Belden moved forward, leaned on the table, looked straight into her luminous eyes.

The fan moved desultorily. The Red Woman's eyes stared, untroubled, into his. There was no flicker of interest in them, no hate, no friendliness. They were blank. Like the living dead.

Belden uttered his next words in a low voice which scarcely carried beyond the few feet around them. "Ruth Markham, give me some sign. There are those who would release you from bondage."

THE RED WOMAN'S eyes lowered. Her head shook slightly. Her voice did not change. "You are covered. You will die if you do not turn over the key to that safe deposit box. The girl—"

"That's it!" cried Belden, his voice suddenly rising. "The girl! She must not die. She—"

"Silence," the Red Woman's voice broke in on him, her voice not raised. It's very leaden quality made him pause. He must have sensed that he was getting nowhere. "The girl dies too if you do not comply with the request."

Belden's hands dropped from the table. He straightened. His voice took on a note of hopelessness. He glanced at Anne and shrugged. Her face was a mask of horror.

"All right. Tell your men to shoot. I haven't the key."

The Red Woman's voice remained the same. "It's not so easy. You forget torture. The ruby is worth far more than your dead body. You have ten fingernails. Drawn one by one, they will—"

Anne gasped a scream. She clutched at Belden's arm. He shook her roughly off. He said: "There are two of us. I can take it. Try your torture on Anne."

"You are the one who has knowledge of the key to that box."

"She knows too. I told her in case anything happens to me. We are together, you know."

For the first time there was feeling in the Red Woman's voice. "You call yourself a brave man," she said contemptuously.

Belden leaned forward. Hope sprang to his face. "Then you're *not* hypnotized! You know you're Ruth Markham?"

The Red Woman shuddered convulsively. Her head bowed a moment then came up. "It's no use!" she whispered. "You've made a hideous mistake! You should never have done it. Now they'll kill you both!"

The tapestry shook. Some one was coming out.

"Quick!" hissed the Red Woman. "Take this!" She extended her fan.

Belden grasped it, glancing at it hastily, in puzzlement.

A tall figure suddenly appeared from behind the tapestry. It was Franzheim. The Luger was in his hand, trained on Belden's heart. His face was contorted with rage.

"Get out!" he shouted at the Red Woman. "I'll take care of you later, you braying fool!" To Belden he said: "So you tricked me all along the way! You stole the Kubla ruby from my agent so you could spring this."

Belden gazed at him. "So you're the power behind the Red Woman. You're the real leader of this gang of—"

"Shut up!" grated Franzheim. "Take them!" he shouted.

Belden dropped to the floor, dragging Anne with him. They rolled under the table where they were out of range of the hail of slugs from the two barrels which protruded through the tapestry.

Franzheim fired. Splinters flew from the leg of the table close to Anne's head. still in his hand. He pointed it at Franzheim. A loud cry of pain issued from his lips and he dropped the Luger. The fan was spitting fire!

Two armed men dashed from behind the tapestry, one at each side. They swung in wide arcs, so that they might cover Belden under the table. The door flew open and two more men rushed in, the two elevator guards, their guns drawn, hailing lead.

Belden heaved up, overturned the table. Its top was of solid, three-inch oak. It dropped down between them and the gunmen, as slugs drove into its surface. He reached around and dragged the Red Woman down beside them. She was bleeding profusely on the cheek, where a bullet had grazed her.

Anne cradled her in her lap, heedless of the flying lead.

Franzheim was crouching for his Luger with his uninjured hand. The table shield did not protect them from him. Belden raised the extended fan. His finger moved. From among the blades a flash of fire came and a slug drilled Franzheim's chest. He spun around, collapsed against the tapestry.

Belden whirled, firing across the top of his improvised shelter. He saw a man go down, a slug in his abdomen.

One of the guards crept back until he gained a vantage point from which he could see behind the table top. He raised his gun. Anne screamed, tugged at Belden's arm. He ducked as a slug tore past, whistling through the tapestry.

Belden swung the fan, aiming it past the table. A slug tore into the man's throat. He crumpled up.

The firing stopped. Feet pounded, then died away. He peered cautiously over the table edge. One of the guards lay on the floor close to the door, in a pool of blood. The other had fled.

Anne had the Red Woman's head cushioned in her lap. "Oh, my darling," she cried, "it's so wonderful to be with you after all these years—"

Belden stared at her. "She *is* your mother."

Anne nodded, her eyes brimming.

BELDEN looked at Franzheim. He was sitting up, clutching the tapestry for support, his face twisted with pain. His other hand was pressed against his chest where blood seeped through his clothing. His face was livid with hate.

The Red Woman spoke. Her voice was weak, but carried clearly in the quiet, smoke-filled room. "Yes, Anne is my daughter. Seventeen years ago I discovered my husband was a jewel thief. He forced me to work with him in his crooked business, until finally I couldn't stand it any longer. We had a terrible quarrel. He attacked me. I—I had a gun and I—I shot him. I had to, or he would have—"

"Don't worry," put in Belden; "that was self-defense, all right."

"I thought there were no witnesses until—"

"I get it," broke in Belden. "Franzheim. He was your husband's partner. He saw what had happened. He went to you and told you he would testify he saw you *deliberately* shoot your husband in cold blood. Is that it?"

The Red Woman nodded.

"He used the hold over you to force you to take your husband's place. Right?"

"Yes. But he didn't know I had a baby. I'd kept its birth secret because of my stage career. I was at his mercy, but I determined to save her. One night I walked out of the theater and went to him. I helped him build up the mysterious character of the Red Woman because it fell in with my plan to keep his identity covered so my family wouldn't find me."

"Anne hired me several months ago," said Belden, "to try once more to find you. I searched the newspapers of the year following your disappearance. I found an obituary notice in a paper eleven months after your disappearance, announcing the death of Ruth Markham."

"I arranged that," explained the Red Woman. "I bribed an undertaker to bury an unknown woman in my name. I thought it would stop the search."

"Apparently nobody saw that obituary," said Belden. "I traced it down and forced the story out of the undertaker. He couldn't tell me anything about you. But he showed me a diamond-studded brooch you had given him. I traced it to the London jewelers who had made it. I found it had been stolen from an American actress residing in London. The theft had been laid to the Red Woman's gang. I set out to find the Red Woman. Later, hearing of the mystery surrounding your identity, I jumped at the possibility of a connection between you and Ruth Markham. But there was no way of getting to you to find out. So Anne and I went to London right after the theft of the Kubla ruby and trailed your agent, who was bringing it to America. We stole the ruby from him and tipped off the Federal agents against us. Anne let them take her, while I posed as a cab driver and managed to escape with the ruby. I put it in a safe deposit box, intending to turn it over to the police.

Franzheim snarled, his teeth gritted in pain. "That damn double-crossing twist pulled a fast one on me. She—"

"Yeah," said Belden. "She hired you to spring her, figuring you'd get her to lead you to me. We knew you had some connection with the Red Woman. You shook off the Feds tailing her and then went for me."

Belden looked down at the Red Woman. "We might have been laid out cold if you hadn't slipped me this." He held up the fan.

"What is it?" asked Anne.

"A snub-nosed .32 built into the ivory handle of the fan," explained Belden.

"I bought that from an old Chinese," said the Red Woman. "I—I meant to use it on myself long ago. I lacked the courage."

Belden grinned. "Good thing you didn't." He pointed at Franzheim. The man's head had fallen forward. "He's out for keeps. You're free now. With what we can prove, you'll be quickly freed of any homicide charge. You can go back to life and get back what it's taken from you."

Anne smiled tenderly at her mother.

"As for you, young lady," said Belden, shaking a finger at Anne, "you'll have to get busy and take your mother's place on the stage. You sure are a swell actress, the way you fooled Franzheim."

Anne's face clouded. "We've been working together on this case for six months. It's been swell going. Now it's all over, and you want me to be an actress. A real he-man would have asked me to be his wife."

Belden's grin widened. "I am very bashful," he said.

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April SURE-FIRE DETECTIVE **Out Feb. 15**

April Fool's Finish

A True Crime Story

By Cliff Howe

MURDER! The sleepy old town of Wethersfield, Connecticut, was startled out of its quiet routine by the news that broke on that spring morning in 1930. Murder had been committed less than a mile away from the grim walls of the state prison, where so many killers had paid for their crimes on the swinging end of a rope.

Strangely enough it was April 1st—April Fool's Day. And the devil himself seemed to have been out during the night to accomplish a hellish prank. That's what the two men thought when they first saw the figure lying beside the road, close to the muddy bank of the Connecticut River. They thought some one was trying to play a joke on them. But the figure didn't move when they called out to it. And a moment later the two men stopped in their tracks, wide-eyed with wonder.

A man's crimson-smeared face made a livid splotch against the mud. A man's eyes stared up at them unseeingly. A human body lay at their feet.

More than this, the killer had left a ghastly bit of handiwork behind him, something that added a horrible, puzzling and inhuman touch. A small, straight piece of river reed had been thrust through the center cartilage of the dead man's nose, just under the nostrils. This disfigurement made him look like a self-ornamented savage. A hole for the reed had been cut evidently by a sharp-bladed knife.

An alarm was given by the two who discovered the body, and when the police came they were puzzled, too. Not by the murdered man's identity, for papers in his wallet gave his name as N. E. Anderson, a native of Sweden, living during his stay in America with his half-sister in near-by Hartford. But the motive for the murder, the identity of the killer, and the reason for that strange disfigurement formed a mystery as black as any the state police had ever had to cope with.

One of the greatest man-hunters in Connecticut was called in to investigate the riddle. County Detective Edward Hickey, famous for having rounded up the million-dollar mail-robbing killer, Gerald Chapman, and for having solved the celebrated Guilfoyle murder, was told to go to work.

He did, with his customary thoroughness. The state police had already told him that Mrs. Munson, the dead man's half-sister, had asked them to investigate Anderson's strange disappearance the evening before. Hickey planned to question Mrs. Munson closely, but first he waited and watched while the county medical examiner went over the corpse.

A bullet had killed Anderson, entering at the back of his head and coming out just above his right eye. The killer had plainly stood just behind him, for there were powder marks on the back of his neck. But why had that reed stem been thrust through his nose cartilage? Hickey stooped closer and made another discovery. Not only had Anderson's nose been weirdly decorated, but both nostrils had been plugged up with other pieces of reed. The thing was as bizarre as any angle of a murder case Hickey had ever run into. He formed the conclusion at once that the murderer had been prompted by some barbarous superstition to decorate his victim.

Hickey straightened, told the police to take care of the corpse while he went to call on Mrs. Munson.

He found Mrs. Munson almost prostrate with grief over the death of her half-brother. Her daughter, Elizabeth, a beautiful, blonde girl of eighteen, was crying bitterly, too. A tall, darkly handsome young man, whose name was Lorenz, was trying to console her.

They could tell Hickey nothing important, except that Anderson had gone out the evening before to a near-by store to make a telephone call to an acquaintance in connection with some loan. This looked like a good lead. But it petered out. Hickey sent a detective to interview the store's proprietor, who remembered the call well enough, but said that the conversation had been in Swedish and he had been unable to understand it. It was a dial phone, and the call couldn't be traced.

Anderson had not come back after that call. Hickey believed that he had been conversing with the man who was soon to kill him. But who was this man? Lorenz, it appeared, had a mere speaking acquaintance with Anderson. He said that Anderson had few close friends in America, and Mrs. Munson and Elizabeth agreed with this. The case seemed more mysterious than ever, but Hickey didn't give up.

He asked to be allowed to go up to Anderson's room and look over his belongings. Mrs. Munson tearfully led him to her murdered half-brother's chamber. Hickey began going carefully through the contents of an old steamer trunk, one that had made the journey from Sweden to America several times. In it he found something which another detective might have passed by as unimportant, but to which Hickey, experienced man-hunter that he was, instantly attached significance. This was a loan certificate for a hundred and fifty dollars issued by a company from whom Anderson had obtained a life insurance policy. It was dated just thirteen days before the murder. A hundred and fifty dollars seemed hardly a big enough sum to be the motive for such a strange murder. But Hickey decided to investigate this lead.

He sent a telegram off at once to the insurance company, asking them to find out who had endorsed the check issued to Anderson. He got an answer back, and a photostatic copy of the check in question. He was amazed to see the name of Lorenz scrawled on the back of the voucher. So! Anderson had got a loan from the insurance company, he had turned that loan over to Lorenz, and Lorenz had said nothing about it.

HICKEY rushed back to the Munson home, got Lorenz's address, sped to it, and found that Lorenz had gone. He had given a plausible excuse for flight to Mrs. Munson and to Elizabeth. He said he had overstayed his time in the United States and was afraid of being questioned by the police and getting mixed up with the immigration authorities. Hickey learned from Mrs. Munson that Lorenz was quite a traveler. He had visited many strange places, it seemed, and had even spent some time in wild parts of South America. Hearing this, Hickey's mind instantly flashed back to that strange disfigurement on the face of the corpse.

He set out grimly on Lorenz's trail, and an exciting chase led all the way up to the Canadian border. Here Lorenz had abandoned his car and bought another. Hickey inspected the old car and found that, though it had been cleaned and painted on the day following the murder, there were a few faint brownish stains visible on the rumble seat cushions.

This evidence, coupled with what he already knew, was enough to make Hickey follow his man on up into Canada. He chased Lorenz like a grim bloodhound and caught up with him at last.

Lorenz was poised and stony-faced, not in the least frightened. He told Hickey the same story he had told Mrs. Munson and Elizabeth—that he had fled from the United States merely to escape the immigration authorities. He said, quite logically, that he was afraid any publicity connected with Anderson's killing might call their attention to him.

Hickey thrust out the photostatic copy of the check he had obtained. "Why didn't you tell me Anderson had made you a loan of a hundred and fifty dollars?"

"Oh, that? It was just a private mat-

ter between us. But I knew if I mentioned it the police would get suspicious."

"And what about those bloodstains in your car?"

Lorenz showed fear for the first time now. His eyes slid away from Hickey's. "I don't know what bloodstains you're talking about."

"Yes, you do—and you've traveled a lot, haven't you, Lorenz? You're familiar with the superstitions of some of the South American Indians. You know, for instance, that they believe a man's soul escapes with his breath through his nostrils, and that there's less chance of a murdered man's ghost bothering his killer if the victim's nostrils are plugged up right after the slaying. It's a silly belief, but a man living among the Indians and hearing their stories might be impressed by it."

Lorenz turned white as death. It seemed almost as though he could feel the ghost of Anderson standing at his elbow. "No, no," he said, "I didn't do that—I didn't do it. But I did kill Anderson. It wasn't just because of the loan either. It was because he was jealous of me and Elizabeth. We got into a fight. I killed him."

Lorenz made a written confession then, but tried to make it appear as though he had killed Anderson in self-defense. But the jury that tried him later thought differently. The bullet-hole in the back of Anderson's skull was damning evidence. Hickey's finding of the loan certificate, and his quick interpretation of the reed in Anderson's nostrils, had spread the net of guilt around Lorenz. The judge at the murder trial finished tying the fatal knots when he pronounced sentence. The April Fool Day murderer swung at a rope's end, back near the scene of the crime again, behind the grim, gray walls of Wethersfield Prison.

In the Next Issue—

DEATH IS TOO GOOD

Gripping Novel

By H. H. STINSON

MURDER MAIDEN

Mystery Novelet

By STEVE FISHER

And other variety long and short stories

April TEN DETECTIVE ACES Out March 5th.

Posed by the Reaper

Before he could fire, Ben Hauser hit him.

By Ralph Powers

Author of "Receipt for Murder," etc.

The chance of breaking the clever killer's alibi hung by a hair. But Inspector Ben Hauser played that chance against the whole police department — even though it might mean his own scalp.

I SAW the crowd in front of the restaurant, got off the bus at the corner and walked back, elbowing my way to the front rank. When I got there, I saw Ben Hauser talking to a little guy with a pale face. People were edging as close to them as they could without stepping into the blood that was smeared on the sidewalk. I slipped between a couple

of men, who growled at me and gave me a dirty look, then found my way blocked by a woman whose arms were full of packages. I couldn't get around her so I called out: "Hi, Ben. Who got it this time?"

He turned and looked at me. He was a big man with heavy shoulders, a thick neck and a broad face. There was a scowl on his face. It deepened the lines around his eyes and his mouth and made him look older than he really was. He didn't see me at first, but when he did, he said: "Oh, it's you, Spic. How did you get here so soon?"

"Part of my job," I shot back.

The woman with all the bundles moved a little and I edged closer. "Who was it, Ben?"

He said: "Nick Rocco."

I whistled. Nick Rocco was a mighty square guy. He had plenty of friends. His Kentucky Club out at the edge of the city did a land-office business. The food was good and so was the entertainment. Rocco had been making plenty of money, but he wasn't tight with it. I knew of a couple of likely young chaps who were going to school on his "scholarships," to say nothing of the hundreds of pocket loans he made every year.

"Bad?" I asked.

Ben Hauser nodded. "Finished, I think. They took him to the hospital, but from what I gather I don't think he's got a chance."

"Who did it?"

Hauser said: "Hell, Spic, if I knew who did it, do you think I'd be standin' around here?" He turned to Tom Kyle and Eddie Brumbaugh, two of the men who had come out from headquarters with him, and said: "Get the names and addresses of these people, will you?" Then he stalked over to the door of the restaurant, pushed it open and went inside. I followed him.

Excepting for the help, the restaurant was pretty deserted. There were a couple of overturned tables, and the door that led to the kitchen was hanging by one hinge. Apparently the people who had been dining when Rocco was shot hadn't wasted any time getting out.

I saw Ben Hauser walk up to a thin, pale-faced guy who was nervously fingering his tie, and heard him say: "Who was Rocco with today?"

The man shook his head. "I—I don't know."

"Where did he sit?"

"Over there." The man pointed toward a table.

Hauser and I both headed for it. We both saw the handkerchief at the same time. We reached for it together, but I was a little quicker. I got it, read the initials in the corner and then handed it to him, trying to look innocent. Ben Hauser grabbed it. He said:

"Damn you, Spic. Will you keep your hands off of things, or do I have to get rough?" Then he looked at the initials.

I said: "L.D., Ben. Might stand for Last Day."

He nodded. "It might stand for Lida Dean, too."

That was fast thinking for a cop, but Ben Hauser wasn't any ordinary cop. When he had been named head of the homicide squad a week before, old Quigley, my city editor, had wanted to know who the blanked-blanked hell Ben Hauser was. I told him that Hauser was a little surprise package that the powers that be in the city wouldn't get over in a hurry. I had known him for a long time, but he wasn't a guy that got into the papers very often. He didn't like publicity. He had told me once that he figured his job was to do things, not to talk about them or read about them in the papers. He did things, too, and his tagging those initials onto Lida Dean was a sample of the way his mind worked. Lida Dean was a featured entertainer in Rocco's Kentucky Club.

I SAID: "You'll want to see her."

He nodded. "Rocco had just stepped out the door when he got it. There was a woman with him. She beat it, got a cab. Apparently she wasn't hurt."

"But she saw the men who shot him."

"She must have."

"Then she'll be blowing, Ben."

"She'll have to blow mighty fast." He started for the door.

"Wait." I grabbed his arm. "Do you know where she lives?"

"I'll find out."

"That might take too long. I can get the address in a minute over the telephone."

He scowled at me.

I saw a phone booth across the room, went over there, spent a nickel and shot in a story of what had happened. The flash had just reached the paper, but the bare details that I was able to add made Quigley almost purr. Then I had him switch me to Doc Froman. Doc was a sports editor, but a part of his interest in sports centered in night clubs. He knew all the spots and most of the entertainers. He gave me Lida Dean's address and said: "It won't do you no good, Spic. You're too old."

I told him where he could go and hung up, turned back to Hauser and said: "Come along. I got it."

He said: "So that's it. Where do you get this 'come along' stuff?"

I saw a beat for my sheet if I worked it right, but I knew that I'd have to hurry. The boys from the other papers would be out soon. That I just happened to be riding past in a bus was a real break.

I said: "Come on, Ben. I just want to tag along. I'll be good."

He hesitated. "You sure you have the correct address?"

"Positive. An' we better hurry. It won't take her long to pack."

For a moment the scowl stayed on his face, then I saw a grin break through, and he said: "All right, Spic, but if you get in my hair it's gonna go tough on you."

We went outside and he picked up Eddie Brumbaugh. Then we went over and got into a squad car. Brumbaugh slid back of the wheel. "Where to?" he asked.

I said: "West. I'll tell you where to turn."

Brumbaugh frowned but Hauser said: "It's O.K., Eddie. We'll dump him later.

When we reached the apartment house where Lida Dean was living, Ben Hauser hunted up the janitor, flashed his shield, and had the janitor go upstairs with us. When there wasn't any answer to our ring, Hauser borrowed the janitor's key. He unlocked the door and shoved it open, and we all barged in. Lida Dean was there, all right. She was standing, pale-faced, in one corner of the room. There was a gun in her hand. At first she didn't know who we were, for she pointed it at us and said: "If you come a step farther I'll shoot."

We stopped, and Ben Hauser said: "It's the cops, lady. Take it easy."

An expression of relief passed over her face, and she lowered the gun.

Hauser said: "You saw it, didn't you?"

She nodded. "I saw it."

"Why did you run?"

For a moment she didn't answer him. She just stood there, looking at him, a slight frown on her face. She was tall, thin. Her eyes were very dark, and her skin had an olive tinge. She had full lips and even, white teeth that showed when she smiled. But she wasn't smiling now.

She said, finally: "You'd run, too, if I'd tell you."

THAT was enough for me. I guess it was enough for Ben Hauser, too. I saw his eyes narrow and I thought that he must be thinking of the same man as I. Then a stony expression came over his face and he said:

"Who was he?"

Lida Dean shook her head.

"Maybe," Hauser suggested, "you don't think enough of Rocco to name his murderer."

That got her. She looked away and said: "Nick Rocco picked me up out of a lousy beer garden in Chicago, gave me a chance, treated me like a lady. I—I'd do a lot for him."

"Then name the man who killed him."

A bitter smile twisted her lips. "Why? What would you do?"

"You leave that to me," Ben Hauser snapped. "Who was it?"

She looked at him again, more carefully, then she threw a name at him, suddenly and without any warning.

"Frank Hess."

Maybe she thought that he would quail at the mention of that name. A good many people have. But Ben Hauser only nodded and said: "I thought so. Get a good look at him?"

She said: "So good a look that I'm getting out of town as fast as I can."

Hauser moved over to a telephone across the room. He gave a number and when he got his connection, he asked that a couple of men be sent out to the apartment to pick up Lida Dean. Then he hung up and turned back to her. Her face seemed more pale than when we had first come into the room. She crossed over to where he stood and took his arm.

"You can't do that," she said. "You can't do that."

"But I have," he told her.

"He—he'll kill me."

"No he won't. We'll take care of that."

She shook her head, stubbornly. "I'll never admit on a witness stand what I told you. Even—even Nick wouldn't expect me to do that."

Ben Hauser shook off her arm. He turned to Eddie Brumbaugh and said: "Eddie, you stick here until the men get here from headquarters. Book her as a material witness. I'm takin' the car."

Brumbaugh nodded, and I saw him feel for his gun. He didn't look like he felt any too well.

Hauser started for the door, and I got in his way.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Where do you think?" he snapped. "I'm going out to arrest Frank Hess."

I shook my head. "For Pete's sake, Ben, use your head."

He glared at me. "You heard what she said, didn't you?"

I nodded.

"Well, get out of my way."

I said: "Look here, Ben, Hess'll have a dozen men who will give him an alibi. The girl will back down on you. Then where will you be? Don't make a fool of yourself."

He said again: "You heard what she said, didn't you?"

"But—but you don't just go out and arrest men like Frank Hess."

He laughed, grimly. "The hell you don't, Spic. Watch an' see. He may be quite a guy to you an' to some others in this town, but to me he's just a murdering heel. Get outta my way."

He reached out and pushed me aside, jerked open the door and went out.

I looked over at Eddie Brumbaugh. Brumbaugh frowned. He said: "When Ben gets his dander up there's hell to pay; but he's bitin' off a mighty big chunk this time."

I grunted, said: "You watch the girl." Then I hurried after Ben Hauser, but I didn't make it to the street in time. The squad car was gone.

I STOPPED by the office and went in to see Quigley. He scowled at me, shouted:

"What are you doin' here? Rocco's dead—we just got word from the hospital. I want a statement from the police commissioner, from the Chief, from this new guy on the homicide squad. I want to know what—"

"You want to know who," I interrupted. "Well, it was Frank Hess. Think that over for a while."

"What!"

I nodded. "Positive identification."

He whistled, grabbed a telephone and shouted into it, "Stop the presses." Then he whirled on me. "What's the story?"

I said: "Let the presses go ahead. You won't print it." Then I told him about Lida Dean.

When I finished, he said: "That all you got?"

I nodded. "Hauser's gone to arrest Hess."

"What is he, a fool?"

"Not a fool. Just a very determined man."

Quigley grunted. He said: "You get back to headquarters. Phone me when Hauser turns in his resignation."

I went on back to headquarters, feeling a good deal like Quigley felt. Frank Hess wouldn't be pulled in on anything as shaky as a girl's identification, especially when you could bank on her to back down. Hauser might get him, bring him in, but there was even some question

about that. Frank Hess was a strange man. He didn't court publicity. He wouldn't like being arrested, even if he had an iron-clad alibi.

When I got down to headquarters, almost the first man I saw was Eddie Brumbaugh. I went up to him and said: "Get her in all right?"

He shook his head, looked a little sheepish. "She got away."

"Got away?"

He nodded, but didn't look me in the eye.

I said: "Hell, Eddie, don't expect me to believe that one. You let her go, didn't you?"

He scowled at me, grated: "She got away, I tell you. I turned my back for a minute to let her change her dress. She sneaked out."

"Think Hauser will believe that?"

He said, stubbornly, "It's a break for Hauser, if he only knew it. A break for the girl, too."

I didn't get to answer him, for just then Hauser came in. He looked across the room at Eddie Brumbaugh. There was an expression on his face that I didn't like. Then he spoke and his voice cracked like a whip.

"Eddie, come here."

Brumbaugh turned around and saw him. His face tightened, and he walked forward. There were several other men in the room. At a table several were playing rummy. The game stopped, and everyone looked over to where Brumbaugh faced Ben Hauser.

Hauser said: "So you're yellow, huh?"

Brumbaugh shook his head. "She got away, Ben."

"She did like hell. You let her go. You're afraid of Frank Hess—on his payroll, maybe."

Brumbaugh flushed. He said: "That's a lie, Ben."

I saw Ben Hauser's fists double, could see his body trembling. I thought that in another moment one of those huge fists would crash out and send Brumbaugh reeling back across the room. But I was wrong. Instead, Hauser's shoulders slumped and he said, in a tired voice: "Get out, Eddie. Get out of my sight. You make me sick. I never want to see you again."

Eddie Brumbaugh turned and stumbled from the room. A moment of deep silence followed his exit. The other men avoided looking at Ben Hauser's face.

Ben Hauser looked around at them slowly. They were all old-timers. Some of them had started out with him as a cop. He knew them well, knew all about them; but now, as he looked at them, I could see by the expression in his eyes that he wasn't sure that he knew them at all.

He walked, finally, over to the table where the rummy game had been going on. The men there were on his squad. Jimmie Tait, Keno Johnson, Walter Evans and Slim Buzatti. He said to them: "Well, where do you line up?"

Jimmie Tait got to his feet. He said: "What do you want me to do, Ben?"

Hauser shook his head. He said: "Frank Hess killed Nick Rosso. I know it. The only witness who could give a positive identification is gone. But that doesn't make any difference to me. I'm goin' after Hess. Who can I count on?"

Tait said: "I asked you what you wanted me to do, didn't I?"

A grin came to Hauser's face. He said: "Thanks, Jimmie." Then the grin went away, and he looked at the other three men.

They didn't speak at once, and he said, sharply: "Well?"

Evans said: "Now Ben, don't get us wrong. But you can't just go out and arrest a man unless you can prove—"

Hauser's harsh laugh cut him off. He said: "That'll do, Evans." Then he turned and stalked out of the room. Jimmie Tait followed him, and I trailed along.

When we got to the cubby-hole that Hauser called his office, he turned to me and said: "Who the hell asked you to come along, Spic?"

"No one, Ben," I answered. "I just came."

"Maybe you think I'm a fool, too."

I nodded. "Sure you are." I sat down in one of the two chairs in the room and leaned back.

He scowled at me for a minute, then said: "If I read anything in that lousy

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sheet of yours that ain't true, I'll forget how long I've known you, Spic."

"What about Hess?" I asked. "Didn't you find him?"

He shook his head. "But I found his alibi."

"Good one?"

He nodded, slowly. "Too good. It's almost perfect. It seems that he was in a barber shop at the time Rocco was shot."

I frowned. "That'll be hard to break."

"Not so hard as you think. Come along."

WE went to a barber shop on the south side of the city. Hauser talked to the barber. The barber said that he knew Frank Hess, that he had worked on Hess that day, starting just at noon. He told all that he had done. It was plenty to keep a man in a chair for a couple of hours at least. And Ben Hauser made a list of all the things that the barber mentioned. He also got the names and addresses of other men who had been in there at the same time. The barber had all the information down pat, as though he had been expecting to be questioned.

When we left, I said to Hauser: "Hess wasn't in there but it's a good alibi."

He nodded. "Like I told you. Too good."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Break it."

"How?"

He turned to Jimmie Tait. "Jimmie," he said, "you get a picture of Hess an' look up these men who were in the shop. See if they recognize it. That's the first step."

Tait nodded, took the list of names and left us. When he had gone I said: "They'll recognize the picture, Ben. Then what?"

"Then I want to see Frank Hess."

"Are you going to arrest him?"

He nodded. "Of course."

We went back to headquarters and when we got there, Hauser found a note on his desk asking him to come to the commissioner's office. I walked over with him and hung around outside while he was in talking to the commissioner. When

he came out, his face was red and he was perspiring.

"Well, what happened?" I asked him.

He glared at me, started to swear, and when he ran out of words, I said: "As bad as that?"

"Worse," he snapped.

"He called you off, didn't he?"

Hauser nodded.

I shrugged and said: "Well, that's that."

But Hauser shook his head. "Not by a damn sight, Spic. I'm still head of the homicide squad. It's still my case."

"You're going ahead with it?"

"Of course I am."

It was getting along toward six o'clock, and I left Ben Hauser at his desk and telephoned Quigley. He said things to me that weren't very nice. One of the other sheets had come out with a statement by the commissioner, promising drastic action against the murderer of Nick Rocco. I hadn't sent it in, didn't even know that the commissioner had made it.

Quigley asked: "What about that guy Hauser? Has he come to yet?"

I said: "He's all right."

"What do you mean, all right?"

"I'll tell you later," I said, and hung up. But I was a good deal worried about what I would have to tell Quigley later on.

I went out to get a bite to eat and when I came back, Ben Hauser was gone. He hadn't left any word as to where he was going, and after hanging around for a while, chewing my fingernails, I set out to try and find him. One after another I visited every bar in the city where I thought I might run across Frank Hess, for I had a hunch that Hauser would be looking for him, too.

Finally, I found Hess in a place called the Top Hat. There wasn't anything top hat about that joint but the name. It was on the East Side and was a pretty shady place. A couple of times the license had been revoked, and it had been closed. But it always opened up again.

There weren't many people there, and three of the four men with Frank Hess I recognized. They weren't men that a

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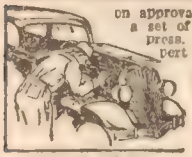

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person would be proud to number among his acquaintances, unless he had a lot of enemies and needed help. All of those three had police records. One had just recently been released from prison; one had been tried for murder. The third was a skinny-faced gunman who had drifted in from the East a couple of years before.

Hess didn't usually go around with such men. The recognized head of the underworld, he generally avoided its members in public. Seeing them with him tonight worried me. It could only mean one thing: Hess knew that Hauser was after him—and he was ready.

WHILE I was wondering what I should do, the door opened—and Ben Hauser came in. He saw those men at once. His face tightened. They saw him and stopped talking, turned to stare at him. I saw a couple of the men's hands drop out of sight under the table.

Ben Hauser must have noticed that, too. He must have seen the tension in the group. But if he did he didn't give any indication of it. He just walked up to the table and said: "I want you, Hess."

Frank Hess was a thin, dark-complexioned man. He had dark, slick hair, deep eyes and lips that smiled easily. They smiled now, and he said: "Hello, Ben. Have a chair?"

Hauser shook his head. "I want you Hess. Come along."

The smile left Frank Hess' face. He shook his head and said something so low that I couldn't catch it. I moved closer, saw Hauser pale, heard him say: "I ought to knock your teeth down your throat for that."

Hess said: "Now, take it easy Ben. Let's talk this over."

Ben Hauser's fist came up so fast that I didn't see the blow until it crashed against Hess's jaw. Then, at the same time he lifted his foot and jammed it against the table, shoving hard. Hess went over, his chair tilting backwards, and the table bowled over two of the other men. A gun went off, slamming a bullet into the ceiling. I threw myself

forward, grabbing for the arm of one of the men who was standing and who had his gun out. I reached him just before he fired, managed to jar his arm, and the bullet intended for Hauser went into the bar. He jerked loose, but before he could fire again, Ben Hauser hit him. He wasn't interested in firing a gun after that.

The fight was short and didn't amount to much more. One of the men ducked out of it and left by the back door, along with the other customers in the place. The other four joined Hess on the floor. When it was over, Ben Hauser had some bruised knuckles and a grin on his face.

He said: "Thanks, Spic. How did you get here?"

I looked down at Hess. The side of his face was already swollen. "You've done it now," I said.

"Done what?"

"Look at his face."

"It's a murderer's face. I didn't hit it hard enough."

"You've got to prove that he's a murderer. Remember his alibi."

Hauser's grin didn't leave his face. He said: "Look at him, Spic, an' remember his alibi."

I looked down at Hess. He looked like a man usually looks just after a haircut.

I said: "Well?"

"Look close," Hauser insisted.

I looked closer but still didn't see anything.

Hauser said: "Remember all the things that barber said he did to him. He said, among other things, that he gave him a hair singe. Well, look at that hair."

I looked. Hess's hair wasn't singed.

Hauser said: "I'm takin' him in, Spic. You can tell your paper that."

"It isn't enough, alone."

"It's enough to question his alibi, to arrest him on. I'll get more."

He sounded so sure of himself that I began to wonder if perhaps I hadn't been wrong. But the next morning things looked different. I read what the early editions of the paper had to say and then went down to headquarters and hunted him up. He was sitting in his of-

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fice, staring at the wall. When I came in he didn't even look at me.

I said: "So Hess got out."

"On bail," he answered.

"What about the singed hair?"

He clenched his fists. "The barber who made that statement told the commissioner that I got him rattled. He says, now, that he didn't singe Hess's hair. If you want the whole story, the men whom Tait saw will swear that Hess was in the barber shop, and I don't have any idea what's happened to Lida Dean."

"So your case has blown up higher than a kite."

"No. I'm not through."

"You will be by noon. The city council is meeting today. It's back to the sticks."

He stood up, shook his head. "Hess is still a murderer, and I'm still head of the homicide squad." Then he walked out.

I HUNG around, played a little rummy and smoked a lot of cigarettes, and wondered what in the world Hauser could do now. I couldn't think of a thing that would save him. Unless he had a lot of luck in a hurry, he would find himself demoted, and some one else would take over the case. Eventually, then, it would be buried with a lot of other unsolved crimes; but Ben Hauser would never have another chance to get out of the ranks, and Frank Hess would be more secure than ever. At least, that's the way it looked to me, and I was feeling mighty glum about it when Ed Baker, who covers headquarters for a rival sheet, busted into the news room and grabbed a telephone. The story that he shot in made me dizzy. I relayed it to my own paper and then hunted up Ben Hauser.

"You're a fool for luck, Ben," I said. "Have you really got it?"

He nodded, pointed to a film box on his desk. "There it is, Spic. The Anderson Film Company, a firm that makes these advertising movies for various stores, happened to be making one for a moving company just a block from where Rocco was killed. They were taking a picture of one of the moving vans in the street, and the movie shows a car with Frank Hess in it. There's a clock in the

picture, too, that sets the time. It smashes his alibi to hell."

I went over and thumped him on the back. "You've done it, boy. You've done it."

We chatted about it for a while, and then the extras hit the street. I went out and bought one, brought it in. He read the headlines and nodded, then laid the paper aside. It was getting close to noon.

"Hadn't you better run out an' get something to eat," he suggested.

I shook my head.

"Beat it, Spic," he said. "I've got work to do." He got up and started to elbow me toward the door, but we didn't ever reach it, for it opened, and Frank Hess came into the room. He was flanked on each side by a man who jerked out a gun as soon as they got in.

I raised my hands, saw that Hauser had raised his. Then I looked more closely at Frank Hess. There was a worried look in his eyes, and he seemed nervous.

He rasped out: "Where is it?"

Hauser said, thin-lipped, "Where is what?"

"The film, you fool," Hess snapped. "Where is it?"

Hauser made no answer, but I saw Hess's eyes go past him to his desk where the film lay, and I saw some of the tension go out of his body.

He said: "There it is on the desk, Mike. Get it."

One of the men slid around us, got the film. He brought it back, passed it to Frank Hess and Frank Hess grinned. He said to Hauser: "You sort of talked out of turn, didn't you."

Hauser shook his head. "You can't get by with this, Hess."

But Hess was getting by with it. He had the film. With two of his men, he had just walked in and taken it. The situation that Hauser faced flashed through my mind. How could he explain that the film had been stolen by Hess? Who would believe him? And what if they did believe him? The film would be gone. In another moment Hess would walk out with it, and that would be that.

I looked at Hauser. He was staring steadily at Hess. There was a sardonic ex-

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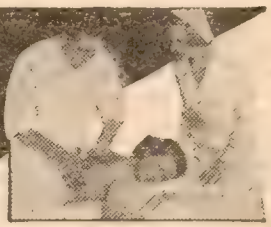

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pression in his eyes. He said, again: "You can't get by with this, Hess."

Hess laughed. He said, "So long, Ben," and took a step back toward the door.

Then the door opened again, and I saw Eddie Brumbaugh standing there in the hall. He didn't look well. There were circles under his eyes, and he hadn't shaved. One of the men whirled around to face him and snapped: "Come in an' shut the door."

BRUMBAUGH came into the room. I saw him glance at the box of films under Hess's arm and then look at the two men Hess had brought with him. He looked at me and at Ben Hauser. Then he said to Hess: "Where are you goin' with those films?" There was a snap to his tone that warned me what to expect.

Hauser said: "Eddie, take it easy."

But Eddie Brumbaugh stepped forward to Frank Hess and, reaching out, jerked the films away from him. His fist snapped up and thudded against Hess's jaw. One of the men clubbed his gun and smashed Eddie in the side of the head. The other fired, and as Eddie Brumbaugh sagged from one blow, I saw his body jerk from the shot of the other man.

Then Hauser let out a yell and climbed the man who had shot Brumbaugh. He knocked the gun across the room, socked the man in the face, staggered him, followed up and hit him again. I didn't see the rest of it, for the other man took up my attention. But anyhow, it didn't last long. It wasn't a minute before the door busted open and a bunch of uniformed cops barged in. We didn't need cops, however, nearly as much as a doctor.

When the confusion had died down, and they had hustled Frank Hess and his two men off to lock them up, Ben Hauser bent over Eddie Brumbaugh, who had been carried to a cot in the recreation room. The shot had clipped his shoulder. He wasn't hurt badly.

Eddie Brumbaugh said: "I got 'er, Ben."

"Got who?"

"The dame who—who got away. She'll

talk, too. I—I'm sorry, Ben, that I went sour on you."

Ben Hauser grinned. "That's all right, Eddie."

He went back to his office, and I trailed along. He was frowning. I said: "What's the matter, Ben. You ought to feel mighty happy. Some day they'll make you chief."

He shook his head, picked up the box of film that some one had put back on his desk, jiggled it in his hand for a moment, and then said to me: "What'll I tell Eddie?"

"What'll you tell him about what?"

"About this film?"

I frowned, said: "He saved it for you, didn't he?"

Ben Hauser nodded. "Sure, but there wasn't any point in it. This film isn't any use in the case."

I stared at him. "Then where is the film?"

"There isn't one."

"Isn't one?"

He shook his head. "That film company did take a picture of the street at just about the time of the murder, but it didn't show anything. I just got to thinking about what a break it would be for me if it did; then I got an idea that if I couldn't get Hess on straight, legitimate evidence, I might be able to trap him on framed up evidence. So I borrowed a film and lugged it down here, wired my office with a dictaphone and put Tait on the other end. Then I waited for Hess to show up."

I whistled. "Boy, what a chance!"

"Not a chance at all. He was the murderer, wasn't he? We knew that. He had to come. That's all there was to it. Besides, if I didn't get him I was finished."

I said: "You were plenty lucky, Ben."

"No, I made my luck, Spic. But what'll I tell Eddie?"

I said: "Tell him he's a great guy. After all, he got the girl back, an' on top of that, jumped Hess."

He nodded and sat down at his desk. "Okay, Spic. An' now, beat it, will you? I've really got to get past some of this paper work."

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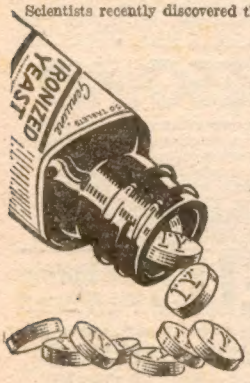

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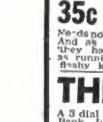

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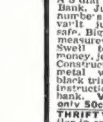

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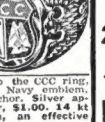
Open Any Lock



Did you ever lose or forget your keys? Probably many times. Don't worry any more about lost keys (or any key for that matter), as these master keys will open almost any ordinary lock. Five different keys for various types of locks. You'll save over half of what you'll use them once, but you'll probably find them so handy that you'll always carry one.

5 MASTER KEYS price 25c

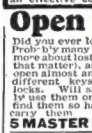
WONDERFUL X-RAY 10c

GREAT CURIOSITY! With it you can appa ently see the bones in the finger s. lead in a pencil, even the flesh seems transparent. Always ready for use. **Only 10 c ppd.**

WHOOPEE CUSHION

Whoopee Cushion is made of rubber, inflated like a balloon, and then placed on a chair, couch, seat, etc. When the victim unsuspecting sits upon the cushion, it gives forth noises that can be better imagined than ames-cribed. **Price 25c**

Surprise Soap



Looks like an ordinary bar of soap. But it dyes the face and hands. A real startler that will make the booby-trapper easy on the next bar of soap. Carbo-used many times. **Price 15c postpaid.**

NOSE BLOWER

If you want to blow your nose loud, with all the realistic imagination of a zombie, a bronx cheer, raspberry and a trombone, get this nose blower. **Price 10c.**

LOOK-SEE WONDERFUL INSTRUMENT 35c

Nine separate articles in one. Odd, curious and interesting. Lots of pleasure as well as very useful. Double Microscope for examining the wonders of nature. Opera glass, Stereoscope, Burning Lens, Reading Glass, Telescope, Compass, Mirror, Saw Sharpener, Scope for examining eye, ear, nose and throat. Worth its cost to locate one painful cinder in the eye. Folds flat and fits the pocket. Something great—you need one. **Price 35c.**

Serpent's EGGS

Light each of the "eggs" with a match and they will soon make a regular snake of ever increasing length. While burning they twist and squirm in a lifelike manner. Box of 12 **only 10c postpaid.**

SQUIRT ROSE 10c

When someone smells the Rose in your button hole they get a shower of water or ink. **10c**

FRENCH PHOTO RING 25c

A handsome ring, finished in imitation platinum, and set with a large imitation diamond. In the shank of the ring is a small microscopic picture almost invisible to the naked eye, yet magnified to an almost incredible degree. Pictures of bathing girl beauties, French actresses, views of France, Panama Canal, others show the Land of Forever, every word legible. **Only 25c ppd.**

MAGIC FLUTE

New patented musical instrument. Wonderful invention—nothing like it. You can be a real musician and play all the latest popular songs, ragtimes, jazz, Hawaiian, dance hymns, dance music; fine for home entertainments. No teacher, no fingering, and once you have mastered it you can play all kinds of music with facility and ease. Sure to please. **10c, 3 for 25c.**

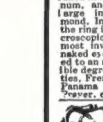
SILENT DEFENDER

Used by police officers, detectives, sheriffs and night watchmen as a means of protection. Very effective. Easily fits the hand. Useful in an emergency. Aluminum. Wt. 2 oz. Pocket size. **25c. 2 for 45c.**

FUN LICENSES 10c

Large size, nicely printed with seal suitable for framing. Hand one of these to your friend and he will never forget you! Your choice: **Marriage License; Boot'eggers License; Mariage Certificate** (it looks really like it) **Ex & graft-ers Certificate; Gos-sipers Certificate; Spanish Athletes (Bull Throwers) Certificate; Gold Diggers & Grafters Certificate; One Armed Drivers & neckers Certificate; Kibitzers Certificate. Only 10c each, 3 for 25c.**

STAGE MONEY



With a bunch of these bills, it is easy for a person of limited means to make a great impression by flashing a roll of these bills in the proper time and peeling off a genuine bill or two from the outside of the roll. The effect created will be found to be all that can be desired. Prices: 40 bills 20c, 120 for 50c, or $3.50 per thousand postpaid.

DANCING SKELETON

A jointed figure of a skeleton 14 in in height, will dance to music and perform various gyrations and movements while the operator may be some distance from it. It will lie down, stand up, dance, etc. We send full and complete instructions. **Price 10 cents. 3 for 25 cents postpaid.**

10c pd.

CHAMELEON 25c

WATCH IT CHANGE COLOR

Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change color from black to light. Wear one on the lapel of your coat as a curiosity. Shoots out its tongue like lightning, catching flies and insects for food. No trouble to keep. Can go for months without food. About 4 in. long. Packed to any address in USA by mail. We guarantee safe arrival and live delivery. **Only 25c**

LEARN TO HYPNOTIZE

See how easily you can master the secrets of Hypnotism. Control strange power. Sway others at will. Influence the thoughts of others, control their desires; and be the master of every situation. Make others love you. Increase strengthen your will power, banish fear and worry, improve your memory, overcome bad habits, etc. **Price 25c**

HOW TO LOVE 10c

Every normal being is susceptable to love's tender passion. When love comes the lovers realize how inadequate is the language at their command to express the deepest thoughts of the cunning passions that gnaw and tear at their hearts. It is to soothe the soul of the love-lorn that this work has been compiled. All about LOVE! **PRICE 10c POSTPAID.**

BIG ENTERTAINER

326 Jokes & Riddles, 25 Tricks, 19 Stunts, 10 Comic Toasts, 13 Stories, 105 Money-making Secrets, 11 Comic Recitations, Funny Readings, 11 Parlor Pastimes, 13 Flirtations, 110 Names & Their Meanings, 10 Puzzles, 37 Amusing Experiments, Deaf and Dumb Alphabet, Shadowgraphy, Fortune Teller, Fortunes with Cards, Magic, etc. Bigger than ever, this trilogulsm, Cut-outs for Checkers, Chess, Dominoes, Parlor Games, 3 Magic Secrets, Spanish Prison Puzzle, Anagrams, 25 Card Tricks, Crystal Gazing and 100 other things **for only 15 cents postpaid.**

HOW TO BUILD A MIDGET RACER

Complete blueprints for 3 different racers. The how to build instructions can be built from a few dollars. All about racer parts, gears, transmission, clutch, frame, racers, track regulations, blueprints, how to add a motor to your bike at little cost, increasing speed, etc., etc. Crammed full of information

25c

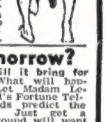
Over 75 illustrations, plans & blueprints. **COMPLETE BOOK, only 25c.**

JU-JITSU DON'T BE BULLIED

30c

The Japanese art of self-defense New methods of attack and defense are given, illustrated so that you cannot fail to understand them. Deals fully with trips, throws, wrist locks, body holds, defense against wolverine, strangling, armlocks, scissors, splits, headlock, holding man down, double knee throw, back attack, defense against knife, one hand throat strip, defense against two assailants, head throw, secret thumb knockout, nerve pinches, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself under circumstances with nature's weapons. Fear no man, guns or Knives! "Science of Ju Jitsu" only **30c.**

FORTUNE TELLING CARDS



Tomorrow?

What will it bring for you? Why wonder? Let Madam Le-Normand's Fortune Telling Cards predict the future! Just get a deck and friends for miles around will want to get in on the fun. At parties, gatherings, evenings, etc. everyone will want to tell their fortunes. When things start to slow up and the guests start to sit and mumble about the weather, pull a pack of fortune telling cards and you'll sit up! It interests and fascinates them. There is nothing difficult to telling the fortunes—every card is plainly given its meaning and the connection between the cards becomes at once apparent. Full directions with each deck. **Price 35c per deck. Deluxe deck with 52 ivory finished cards. 75c. postpaid.**

Pocket Telescope

Eagle-Eye Vision Six Power 25c

Big, 3 draw, 6 power, telescope, for only **25c!** Swell for outdoors, nature study, sports, looking at the moon. Converted into Solar telescope by using small glass so you can observe sun spots, etc. 5" long. **Price 25c.**

STEAM ENGINE

World's biggest value in mechanical toy. This steam engine, 7 in. high by 2½ in. diameter. Watch the flywheel spin around and hear the engine puffing when you get the steam up. Light the burner with water, and in a few minutes it is blazing along at top speed! Runs for hours on one filling and will run small toys off the big wheel. Foolproof, harmless, fully tested and guaranteed to run. Engine is beautifully lithographed in several colors. New model which runs on alcohol or canned heat. **35c. Electric model, 45c, postpaid.**

LUMINOUS PAINT

LUMINOUS PAINT, when applied to an object, emits rays of white light, rendering it **visible in the dark. The darker the night the brighter it shines.** Simple as you can do it! Apply some to the dial of your watch so you can tell time by night. Paint push buttons, switches, anything, everything with it. **Small bottle 25c, Medium Size 50c, Large Size $1.00, postpaid.**

SEX INDICATOR

10c

In Europe this Indicator is used to tell the sex of eggs, dogs, handwriting, etc., etc. We have tried it many times, and although we don't see how it's done, yet we have never seen it fail. Over a man's hand or handwriting, etc. it swings in a straight line. Over a lady's hand, in a circle. Try it yourself. **PRICE 10c**

DANCING SKELETON

10c pd.

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INVISIBLE INK. CAN BE READ ONLY BY THOSE WHO KNOW THE SECRET. USED BY SPIES. COMPLETE DIRECTIONS. 10c PER BOTTLE.

A rich $2.50 salon quality 8x10 enlargement ...hand colored... in this exquisite frame...

Special ... $1

HERE'S the most amazing offer ever made in the history of the photographic industry. You would ordinarily expect to pay $1.50 upwards for an artistically, hand colored, salon quality photo enlargement . . with this sensational bargain offer, you get a life-like hand colored 8x10 salon quality enlargement and the deluxe simulated leather easel back frame pictured at the top of this advertisement all for $1.00 . . this frame alone would be considered a genuine bargain anywhere for $1.00.

Your photo is enlarged and hand colored to portray a life-like likeness by expert artists who specialize in life paintings . . you will be thrilled because these enlarged hand colored photographs seem to actually live . . they all but talk. A true lifetime of pleasure from your photographic treasure.

The frame is selected, exceptionally high quality in modern design . . the last word . . has beveled edge, which you only find in high priced, expensive frames. The easel back permits you to stand it anywhere you choose. Just send us your favorite snapshot or negative today! Our new method enlarges clearly . . beautifully . . life-like . . looks like an expensive painting. FADELESS. Send bust, full length, groups, scenes, baby, mother, dad, sweetheart, animals, pets, baseball or football team or any subject. We enlarge to 8x10 and hand color from any clear photo negative or tintype. **WE GUARANTEE TO RETURN ORIGINALS IN PERFECT CONDITION.**

READ THIS STARTLING GUARANTEE

You must be 100% satisfied or you can return the frame and keep the hand colored 8x10 photo enlargement and get your dollar back.

Special Advice— Send good, clear snaps or negatives for best reproduction—DO NOT Mark Front of Pictures—Write on separate piece of paper when giving us special instructions.

SPECIAL FEATURES

Money back if not 100% satisfied and you can keep the hand colored enlargement.

Hand colored 8x10 enlargement in deluxe simulated leather, easel back frame, all for $1.00.

At least a $2.50 value for $1.00.

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I accept your special offer . . . kindly enlarge the enclosed photo or negative to 8x10, hand color and frame. I agree to pay postman $1.00 plus postage on arrival. It is understood you will refund my $1 if I am not satisfied and I may keep the hand colored enlargement.

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NOTE: Outside U.S.A. $1.50 each. Cash with order.

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Don't send a cent now! Just send a **clear** snapshot negative or photograph, any size, of the subject you want enlarged to 8x10 and hand colored by one of our artists. We deliver to you in one of our beautiful deluxe, beveled edge frames. We put your photo to work immediately and ship promptly. When your postman delivers the package containing the hand colored enlargement and frame, pay him $1.00 plus postage. Your originals will be returned in the package in perfect condition . . then examine your hand colored enlarged photo . . you will enjoy a great surprise because of the high quality work and the exceptional value . . so positive are we of this that we guarantee to refund your $1 if you are disappointed in any way . . and you can keep the hand colored enlargement . . rush the coupon now while this sensational offer is still open to readers of this magazine.